

HALO: Beyond Sol

by Arm Chair General

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Summary: When a stricken Republic cruiser drifts close to the UEG border, what was supposed to be a simple act of border security thrusts the United Earth Government into a civil war in a galaxy far, far, away... Rated M for war violence and foul language. Reader discretion is advised.

1. Chapter 1

A beautiful sunset set this day apart from all else, a pure glory of natural brilliance, until one sees that it is the dead of night. Massive pillars of flames leapt from the melted remains of massive columns as towers of smoke billowed from the epicenter, a grand temple reduced to a storm of bloodshed and death. One being stares at the image blurred by tears as she cringes in a gutter, hoping to not be found by the murderous betrayers sent upon her and her family, wondering only why. Why?

****Recon Satellite 34543 **_**Eagle Eye**_**

****Edge of UEG Space****

****January 25 2234 ****

****14:35 Standard UNSC Military Time****

The majestic blackness of space; lonely, foreboding, and incredibly dull. The ever present boredom of the monotonous work of monitoring the border of UNSC space would drive a human team insane. Thus, this lofty duty was given to monitoring satellites like Eagle Eye. Using slip space sensors, cameras, thermal imaging, electronic and radiation detectors, and radio receivers, relaying a constant stream of information back to the Office of Naval Intelligence. As the brilliance of deep space floated by, Eagle Eye took no pleasure in the view. It merely kept performing its scans as instructed three years ago. While remotely intelligent and aware of its mission, it lacked all but one emotion, curiosity, grown from years of solo operations. So when a radio sweep detected a transmission, the

satellite took immediate interest. It returned to the frequency and began recording. The message was layered in static but _Eagle Eye_ blocked it out as the message continued, now audible.

"_I repeat, this is the cruiser Redemption to all friendly forces, have been boarded by unknown an enemy and_ _need assistance repeat need assi-." _The message ended abruptly. The satellite replayed the recording once, comparing it to all known UNSC naval frequencies and ship designations, coming up blank. _Eagle Eye_ immediately sent the message to ONI while tagging the source with an infrared beam.

Destroyer **_Patton **_**(DD-76)**

5**th**** Fleet**

Orbital Repair Dock **_Chesapeake Bay**_

Reach Orbit

12:23 Standard UNSC Military Time

Captain Arthur Wheeler stared down at the vibrant world that was Reach, the blue and white sky that withheld the glory of human endeavor. Reach was reduced to ash, glass, and flame, the third circle of hell in every sense of the term. Millions died under the Covenant onslaught but humanity's stubbornness reclaimed the tranquility and made heaven out of hell. 40 years of terraforming rebuilt the planet to its former glory. Reach once again was the center of UNSC military power and home to the 5th and 2nd fleets. As the last bit of scaffolding retreated back towards the station, tugs moved into position to guide the large warship out of the docking station. The destroyer had been caught in a meteor shower on a previous patrol and had to replace a broken transmitter and dented plates. The beeping of the ship's transmission beacon interrupted Wheeler's mental history lesson. "Sir," Lieutenant Jack Hafflax reported from his communications terminal. "Admiral Fernson on the horn." Wheeler turned to the comm screen "Patch him through."

"Yes sir" was the automatic reply. The screen lit up, displaying the image of a frigate ringed by stars with the UNSC Eagle in the background and the words "5th Fleet, This we shall defend." Admiral Fernson appeared and Wheeler snapped to attention, saluting along with his bridge crew.

"Wheeler, you never change do you?" the Admiral commented in his gravelly voice, returning the salute.

"No sir," Wheeler replied. "Straight, trim, and never dim."

Admiral Fernson smirked, recognizing the "official" captain's motto. "Damn straight, now, down to business. One of our recon satellites detected a ship of unknown origin. We have already sent Laser Graphic Images and its location to your A.I. I need you to check it out. We may be dealing with a first contact scenario, but it could be Covenant stragglers, so don't dive in head first. We have two frigates being rerouted from a festival at Harvest but it will take them some time to rendezvous. If you run into trouble, call it in immediately, the nearest taskforce is refueling at Arcadia, but they are ordered to drop everything in the event this thing escalates.

"

"Understood sir," Wheeler replied, saluting again. "Consider it done" The screen blinked to black and Wheeler turned to the holographic display. "Patton? What do you have for me?" The display flashed on and a General, chest full of medals, ivory pistols swinging from his hips, materialized.

"It is difficult to decipher, it looks triangular but it has four other shapes connected to it, all different, it doesn't match any silhouette on record."

Wheeler rubbed his chin. "Well, let's go say hello" Patton saluted, nodding. "No holding action sir? Excellent!"

****Wild Space****

****Republic Cruiser **_**Redemption**_**

****12:24 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Another explosion rocked the ship, throwing Ashoka to the ground. Picking herself up from the deck, she turned to face the captain. "Report!"

"More boarding craft sir," the Captain replied. "That makes twelve so far, they just keep coming!" Redemption had been on a routine patrol when she detected a distress call. Jumping to the scene, she was greeted with a flotilla of raid ships and the floating remains of a cargo vessel. Before Redemption had a chance to activate her shields, she was swarmed with boarding craft.

Now, the ship was falling, the clones were simply overwhelmed. As these thoughts passed through her mind the sealed door to the bridge was glowing red, smoking. The bridge guards readied their rifles, pointing at the door. The captain drew his sidearm, clicking the power lever forward. Ashoka drew her lightsabers which flashed into brilliant green beams. The sounds of the arch welders cutting through faded into silence. The troopers steadied their stance. With a massive boom, the door blew open, shrapnel removing the leg of a bridge officer, who screamed in pain. The clones opened fire into the smoke, blue bolts casting shadows as they crashed into the forms behind. Grunts and screams filled the air as multiple Trandoshans were cut down. The remaining slavers returned fire, particles filling the air.

Two troopers fell, chests smoking, one more fell to one knee as he took multiple rounds to the leg. Then face. The captain pointed his pistol and blew the face off the lead Trandoshan, then the next. Another trooper fell, and a member of the bridge crew grabbed his rifle, firing a burst before he too was killed. Ashoka deflected as much as she could but the corridor was filled with particles and lasers. Piercing pain burst from her shoulder and knee and she staggered. The barrier she was creating removed, the last remaining bridge crew officers were cut down. The captain steadied her and led her to the front of the bridge, where consoles sparked and smoked. Three troopers had found cover and were making a stand. Joining them, Ashoka and the captain beat back the slavers. Then, a massive form lumbered through the door. The troopers opened fire but the lasers bounced off. The hulking Trandoshan was clad head to toe in armor of

an unknown metal, carrying a heavy repeater. The Trandoshan fired.

A thick stream of lasers spewed from the massive weapon, engulfing a trooper. The smell of melted plastoid filled the air and the clone ceased to exist. His comrades began to retreat, but they met the same fate. The Trandoshan then dropped its weapon, and reached for the blade on its back. With a screech, the pitted sword slid from its sheath. Lumbering forward at a surprising pace, it swung its blade. Ashoka reflexively blocked and the blades met. The sword won. Lightsaber flung from her hand, Ashoka fell to the ground as a blue bolt seared over her head. The Trandoshan reeled back with a cry, face plate smoking. The captain fired again, point blank. Stepping back, the monster ripped off its mask, and charged forward, blade first. The captain let out a scream, impaled in the chest, red blood dripping to the deck. With a massive claw, the Trandoshan slid the captain off his blade, turning to face Ashoka. Grinning, it produced a net tossing it over her. Ashoka struggled, but the heavy net kept her pinned. Pressing a button on his gauntlet, the Trandoshan laughed as electricity coursed through the net. Ashoka screamed in pain, then silence.

****UEG Border****

****Destroyer **_**Patton**_** (DD-76)****

****13:04 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Well, that answers question number one, Wheeler thought, as he looked out at the patch of space below. The unknown ship was clearly boarded by a gaggle of vessels, like a mother frog carrying her babies.

"Give me a zoom on that tower structure," Wheeler ordered. The image zoomed in as the camera focused on the tower. The captain could tell it was a mess, even though Wheeler had never seen a ship of this type before. Fire gushed out of holes, thus showing that whatever occupied the vessel breathed a flammable gas. "Send the transmission; let them know we're here." The communications officer nodded and sent out a ping. The motley gaggle of ships immediately turned towards them. "Remove locks on archer pods A through D and one of our Excalibur nukes, MAC gun to be heated to 96%" The bridge crew nodded, and the clacking of keys filled the air.

"Sir," Patton materialized from his podium arms clasped behind his back. "Our hail has been answered"

"Put it on screen" The screen lit up to reveal a reptilian creature with a squat face and large nose and mouth. _Ugly SOB aren't ya? _Wheeler noted in shock as he addressed the, the thing. "You are within the boundaries of the United Earth Government without previous warning, state your business," Wheeler ordered sharply. The thing looked at him in silence. "I repeat, state your business or we will fire on you, this is your final warning, exit the system, acknowledge, or be destroyed." Finally, the thing began to speak in a deep, gravelly voice.

"You have just secured your own doom and my increase in profits, your crew will make a fine addition to my stock, I look forward to seeing you soon, in chains!" The screen winked off, the transmission ended. Wheeler beat down his shock at both the creature's ability to speak

English and the fact that a new race was discovered, and wanted to kill them. _The more things change_

"Sir! The enemy ships are firing!" Patton reported.

"Get me a firing solution for the MAC and lock on to those Sons-a-bitches!" Wheeler ordered

"Impact in ten!" Navigations Officer George Pruitt announced. "Eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, impact!" There was barely a shiver in the coffee mug on Pruitt's desk.

"Damage?" Wheeler ordered, confused by the anticlimactic show of force.

"Minimal sir, hull is at 98% around impact area, no breeches, impact was centered on section F-3 through G-7, no casualties. The crystalline layer took most of the blow." Engineering Officer Laura Nandian replied

"Let's hit them back then, open fire." The ship shuddered as the MAC gun unleashed its 600-ton projectile at 30,000 meters per second. Archer Mark VIII missiles flew from their tubes on pillars of fire, their 600 pound armor piercing warheads leading the way. The MAC round struck the lead ship on the nose at a 75 degree angle, punching through the forward decks before exiting out the bottom and glancing the ship next to it. The second ship spun wildly, venting atmosphere, as the first ship tore in half amid-ship. The Archers punched through the thin armor of four more of the strange ships, explosions mushrooming from deep within.

"The enemy is retiring sir," Pruitt announced. "Shall we resume firing?"

"Sir, the frigates _Okinawa _and _St. Lo _are coming on station." Patton announced, excited by the combat.

"Hold fire until those frigates arrive; let's see what these bastards do then." Wheeler ordered, a slight frown on his face. _This was way too easy, how could such a large vessel fall prey to such inadequate firepower? _

****UEG Border****

****Trandosha slave ship **_**Bone Crusher**_**

****Cargo" Hold****

****13:13 UNSC Standard Military Time****

Ashoka's eyes fluttered open, revealing a dank, dark room. She snapped up quickly, wincing as she tugged her injured shoulder. Focusing, a nervous breath indicated she was not alone. Turning her head, she spotted two Twi'lek girls huddled together in a corner. A human female sat alone in the center, head in her hands. Both were dressed in rags and looked underfed. One Twi'lek had a scar along her left cheek, the white line contrasting on her blue skin. Ashoka reached out towards the human.

"Are you alright?" When Ashoka's fingers brushed against her arm, the

woman leapt back, cowering away.

"Don't hurt me, please!" Ashoka felt her heart break.

"It's okay, I'm a Jedi, let me help."

One of the Twi'leks spoke up. "Bu-but you have been captured yes? It's no okay."

"Don't worry, I can get us out." The three other women said nothing, but all retreated as far against the wall as possible, eyes wide with fear. Ashoka turned her head only to be greeted with a massive fist. Her head slammed into the floor, opening a cut on her brow. The world began to spin, growing fuzzy. A large claw wrapped around her neck and she was lifted upward.

"What's this about escaping?" a gravelly voiced answered in the dark outside the cell. Ashoka gasped for breath, clawing uselessly at the hand that had her neck in a vice. A fat Trandoshan walked into view, whip dragging behind him. The human yelped and began to frantically back towards the wall trying to climb its slick, grimy surface. The fat Trandoshan chuckled at the sight before lashing out with the whip. It skated across the woman's rag, opening the front and drawing blood along her stomach. The woman doubled over, screaming. "No one escapes my ship, not even the likes of you." He motioned for the large Trandoshan to lower her. Glaring, Ashoka spit in his face, causing the Trandoshan to reel back. With a snarl, he back-handed Ashoka across the face before snapping a large metal collar around her neck. Ashoka summoned the Force, feeling it pulse around her, she charged up a force push, but just as she was to focus it into a wall of energy, the collar let loose a bolt of electricity, arcing across her body, and that of the other women. Screams filled the hold.

****UNSC Destroyer **_**Patton**_** (DD-76)****

****UEG Border Space****

****13:23 Standard Military Time****

Captain Arthur Wheeler scanned the holographic display projected from the arm of his chair. The two frigates were displayed, highlighted in blue; the four remaining enemy ships were appropriately colored red and were clustered around the enemy's largest ship. The boarded ship was highlighted green where it slowly drifted away from the standoff. So far, neither side had made a move, waiting for the other to take action. "Any response to our hails?"

Hafflax shook his head as he sent yet another attempt to reestablish contact with the vessels. "No sir, they seem to be content just giving us the finger."

Wheeler rubbed the back of his neck. "What about our scans of the boarded vessel?" Patton materialized on his holo-display, arms folded behind his back.

"Scans show numerous life signatures, but deep penetrating SONAR shows it is the same specimens as the ones that are on the enemy vessel. There are bodies, but no hold outs."

"Right, tell the _St. Lo _to deploy a combat team to sweep and secure that ship. EMP the other vessels, we are going to take them by force, the big one first."

2. Chapter 2

****Boarding Craft Type 43 "Leech"****

****3400 Meters from Unknown Vessel **_**Redemption**_**

****13:45 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Corporal Jacob Meverston shifted nervously in his bucket seat, straining the straps as the boarding craft pushed on towards the unknown vessel. Well, unknown but not unnamed. The ship was evidently called the _Redemption_, but as far as what its mission was, any guess was as good as any.

"Don't tell me you're nervous Mev." Sergeant Hankston chuckled as he placed his MA6C Assault rifle between his legs, butt down.

"He's just worried about bein stuck with your ass on this tub for 10 more minutes sir." Private Nichols Greene quipped, copying his sergeant's actions with his rifle. The pilot's voice crackled over the intercom in the crew bay, his laugh sounding tinny. Chuckles sounded amongst the 15 men in the bay, though the tension was prevalent. The aftermath of the last first contact that happened was still deep in the minds of everyone.

"20 seconds gentlemen." The pilot's voice returned as a red light in the crew bay snapped on.

"Alright, you all know the game, we clear each of our sectors one at a time." A map of the vessel appeared from the gauntlet of the Sergeant's wrist, the sectors that the squad had to clear were illuminated in green, hazardous areas were in red.

"10 seconds boys, brace." The men hunched in towards their straps when they were all thrown forward. The sound of sizzling metal was barely audible as the boarding ship cut its way into the hull. The red light flashed twice.

"Double flash, stand to." The men unlocked their harness and stood single file facing the door. "Weapons check." The bay filled with clicks and clacks as weapons were primed. "Sound off." Hankston turned to face the line of men.

"15 okay."

"14 okay."

"13 okay." The men counted off until it reached the front.

"One okay!" Hankston turned as a loud clank radiated through the boarding craft. The door divided down the middle as the light changed to green. The men braced their feet, ready to charge out.

"Welcome aboard marines, good hunting!" the pilot bid farewell as the ramp fell to the ground. With a loud "ooh-rah!" the men ran into the

ship, rifles raised. Each man fell into a choreographed dance as they formed a semicircle around the craft. The ramp raised itself up and sealed with a hiss.

"Move out!" Harkston ordered. The men fell into groups of three, scanning left and right. Meverston fell in line with corporal Swift and Sergeant Harkston, bringing up the rear. The men passed down a white corridor, then another, and another. They finally reached a sealed door, lights on the panel glowing red. "Prepare to breach, stack up." Harkston ordered, procuring a hacking box from his belt and slapped it onto the panel. Swift and Meverston placed their backs against the wall, each on one side of the door.

"Three, two, one, breaching!" Meverston counted and pushed the red button on the box. The panel lit up green and the door slid open. Immediately, yellow particles filled the doorway, and Harkston slammed his back on the wall, dodging the rounds. Swift yanked a grenade from his belt, pulled the pin, and chucked it through the doorway.

"Frag out!" he yelled. With a muffled whump followed by screams, the marines swung into the doorway, charging through it. Bodies littered the floor, some wearing strange, white full body armor over humanoid forms, others more reptilian like and in patched metal plates. Seven had been ripped apart; another clutched the stump of an arm, yelling in pain. Others were in shock, struggling to rise or orient themselves. The marines didn't given them a chance, mowing down the creatures methodically before pushing on towards the bridge.

"_This is Fire Team Omega, have encountered hostile forces and have eliminated them, 6 tangos confirmed dead, three retreating." _Captain Donovan's voice crackled through the marines' helmet mounted radios.

"Copy Omega, this is Bravo, have encountered hostile forces as well, no casualties have been sustained." Harkston notified over the mike.

"_Confirmed Bravo, continue towards the bridge." _

"Understood." The marines continued forward, single file, rifles constantly sweeping the area.

"Who do you think these people are? I mean, why would the lizard guys be trying to kill the white guys?" Swift asked they passed a row of white armored corpses.

"Racial supremacy?" Meverston suggested as Harkston double checked his map.

"Screw you Mev, this is serious, I mean, what if we get dragged into a war, then what?" Swift toed a lizard corpse as the squad reached another closed door.

"We're marines, we don't get paid to discuss political theory, we get paid to eat, sleep, kill and repeat." Harkston chastised as he punched a random button which caused the door to slide open with a slight swish.

"I feel bad for the ODSTs, they have to take that big fucker, it's

probably crawling with these freaks." Meverston commented as he followed the group through the door.

"_This is Echo, multiple hostiles engaged, one man is down, we're being overwhelmed!" _

"_This Delta, we're inbound to your location, sit tight!" _

"Shit, that was Donovan." Harkston muttered.

"SOB always did get the most action." Maverston muttered.

"_Omega, this Alpha, have you reached the bridge?" _

Harkston clicked his mike. "Not yet sir, lotta debris in the way, we should arrive shortly."

"_Understood, notify me when you have successfully hacked their systems." _

"Yes sir, can do."

"_Alpha out." _

****UNSC Frigate **_**Okinawa **_**(FG-244)****

****200 Meters from Disabled Suspected Enemy Command Ship****

****13:52 UNSC Standard Military Time****

Corporal Jack Freely shifted his feet against the floor of the High Velocity Boarding System "Parasite," tapping the M7 Case less Sub-Machine Gun with a gloved hand. "_40 seconds boys, check systems." _The drop master's voice filtered through the intercom of the one man pod. Jack tapped a few buttons and a schematic of the pod was projected over the inner-wall casing. The pod had no windows, but images were projected from the shock-resistant cameras that gave a panoramic view as if the pod DID have a window. _Everything's green, unless the system scanner is malfunctioning._

"Twelve okay!" Freely commed the drop master as he checked to make sure his restraints were secure.

"_Copy, 10 seconds till launch." _Jack counted down in his head, when he reached five the pod rocketed out of its tube, aiming straight for the largest hostile vessel. _I just hope this thing stays in one piece _

"_Alright troopers, when we hit the ship, link up in the cargo hold, we then search that tub top to bottom and kill anything that lifts a finger to attack us, got it?" _Captain Buck asked, his harsh voice echoing in Jack's pod. "Oorah!" The eleven other ODSs roared in reply.

"_Good, I'll see you on board, god speed!" _

****Cargo Hold****

****Trandosha Slave Ship **_**Bone Crusher**_**

****14:03 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Ashoka awoke on the floor of her cell for the second time today, head swimming. "You okay?" the same Twi'lek girl who doubted there chance of escape asked.

"Been better to be honest." Ashoka said with a slight grin. The girl just stared, not finding the comment remotely funny.

"Hungry?" the other asked, pointing to a roughly carved wooden bowl full of a gray paste.

"Did you already eat?" the two girls shook their head in unison, the lekku swaying slightly. "You go ahead, I'm fine." Ahsoka lied as she felt the hunger tightly grip her stomach. The pair quickly dived in, each taking a piece roughly a fourth of the amount. The human woman was back in her corner, rocking herself and muttering. "You hungry miss?" Ahsoka asked, offering the bowl. The woman looked at her with mistrust. Ashoka dipped a finger and scooped a small glob, popping it into her mouth. It was tasteless and she did her best not to grimace. Apparently convinced the woman took her share. The four ate in silence, not really looking at each other. "I'm Ashoka; may I have your names?" Ashoka asked her cell mates.

The doubtful girl raised her hand slightly "Moyla, my sister Nadya." She indicated the other Twi'lek.

"You?" Ashoka asked the woman.

"Faline." Was her quick reply, eyes staring at the floor/

"Nice to meet you all, kinda wished our circumstances were different though."

Moyla giggled slightly "Me do too." The ship suddenly lurched and the sisters clung to each other. The woman tightened into a ball and screamed.

"It's okay, we're gonna be okay!" Ashoka tried to calm the three, grabbing Nadya's shoulder. "We'll be okay."

3. Chapter 3

****Boarding Site****

****Trandosha Slave Ship **_**Bone Crusher**_**

****14:05 Standard UNSC Military Time****

_Not the worst landing I've ever had. _Freely lamented as he hung upside down in his pod. _Not the best one either. _Freely hit the emergency release on his restraints and he tumbled into the wall of the pod. Seven curious lizard aliens had gathered around the strange object, all of them aiming their weapons. "Well shit," Freely muttered as he grabbed his SMG from its port and readied a magazine. Punching the release code, the bulkhead blasted off the pod, careening into two of the green skinned creatures. Freely dropped to the floor, landing on his back, legs pointed towards the remaining lizards. Raising his weapon, he hosed the aliens with fire, the .197

caliber full metal jacket rounds punching through face masks and slicing necks before the gun clicked empty. Four of the creatures fell down in a pool of their own blood as Freely yanked his M6H Magnum from the magnetic plate on his thigh. Firing one handed, he downed the last creature with five 12.7mm magnum rounds. Climbing to his feet Freely saw four more of the aliens rounding a corner, glancing back in fear. Spotting the lone ODST they stopped in surprise and were immediately shot in the back with the rattling roar of a M739 SAW. Three more ODSTs rounded the corner. One was obviously a corpsman, the red cross evident on his helmet. Captain buck was with them as well, his red trimmed armor easy to remember. "It's about time; I've had to clear this ship by myself!" Freely said, a helmet concealed grin on his face.

The SAW gunner, Private Max Dominguez, laughed as he deftly replaced the drum magazine of the large weapon. "I was afraid of that, wouldn't have wanted you to chip a nail."

Freely scoffed, slapping a new magazine into his SMG. "You're just jealous because the ladies love my soft hands."

"Cut the chatter troopers, we still got a ship to take." Captain Buck reprimanded with a growl. "Get moving and check your corners!" He waved the ODSTs forward and slotted another shell into his shotgun.

"Yes sir captain!" the other three barked and Freely reloaded his weapons, glanced back at the bodies of the fallen aliens, and took point.

****Bridge****

****Unknown Vessel **_**Redemption**_**

****14:17 Standard UNSC Military Time****

"What the fuck is that smell?" Swift asked as he observed the carnage that was the bridge.

"Burned flesh, we've been smelling it on this tub since we boarded." Harkston reminded him as he checked the burning and fried consoles. After stepping over a pile of alien bodies the marines had entered the bridge, shocked at its devastation. "Hell of a last stand." Meverston slowly scanned forward and he caught sight of one of the bridge crew.

"Hey, hey! These guys are human!" Meverston said in shock, rushing to a body.

"WHAT?!" his squad mates yelled in surprise, also dashing forward. They looked at the scorched, bloodied bodies of human crew, all exactly identical down to the red jumpsuit.

"They're clonesâ€¦ How the fuck did this happen?" Harkston said, taking in the corpses. Meverston's brain raced a mile a minute.

_Clones, human fucking clones, holy shit! Holy fucking shit! _"Any of them still breathing?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Nope, dead." Swift answered. He kicked one with a boot. "Yep, fucking dead." Harkston clicked on his mike.

"Alpha, this Omega, we got a situation!" he addressed the command squad on the direct link.

"_This is Alpha, go ahead."_

"Have reached bridge and located dead bridge crew. They're human clones."

"_Say again Omega, human clones?"_

"You heard me damn it, human goddamn clones!"

"_Understood Omega, Christ, uh, standby, continue with your mission."_

"Copy that, not sure we can salvage anything, place is pretty fried."

"I think it's pretty fucked Sarge, not gonna get shit here, everything is either on fire or was." Meverston added glumly as he searched for anything that worked.

"Alpha, data retrieval is not possible, nothing survived this assault." Harkston relayed as he pointed Meverston to watch the door.

"_Understood Omega, scan the bridge thoroughly with your helmet cams then proceed to a supposed data storage facility. Scanners are picking up alotta energy from there."_

"Confirmed it's not the ship's power plant Alpha?" Harkston asked as he slowly paced the room, carefully sweeping the bridge.

"_Confirmed, uploading coordinates now."_ Harkston's wrist mounted PDA flashed once slightly.

"Got it Alpha, will report soon." Harkston cut the mike. "Alright boys, we're off."

****Supposed Cafeteria****

****Trandosha Slave Ship **_**Bone Crusher**_**

****14:34 Standard UNSC Military Time****

"Get down!" Buck yelled as more particle rounds flew overhead. Freely tucked down behind the overturned table, reloading his SMG for the third time.

"Running kinda low here Cap!" Freely shouted to the captain. "We gotta slot these fuckers quick; we can't last in this kind of engagement!"

"Grenades on three!" Buck ordered, yanking two grenades from his belt, pulling their pins and clamping down the spoons. Freely, Dominguez, and their medic Cummings each readied a grenade as well.

"Three two, one, Frag out!" Buck flung his grenades towards the lizards at the other end of the cafeteria where they had made a barricade out of tables and chairs. The other three ODSsTs chucked their grenades as well as hunkered down. Five thunder claps rocked the room and screams of pain a surprise filled the air. "Advance!" Buck ordered, jumping over the table he had taken cover behind a blasted the face off an alien trying to regain its footing. Dominguez unloaded his SAW, gunning down two more and forcing the few remaining aliens to retreat.

"Where the fuck are the others?!" Dominguez asked Freely vaulted over the barricade and shot one the retreating lizards in the back.

"Two died on impact, the rest fucking missed!" Buck shouted back as the ODSsTs charged after the retreating aliens.

"What do you mean missed?!" Freely yelled as he ducked behind a corner, particles filling the hallway. He wrapped his arms around the corner and blindly sprayed the hallway. Squeals sounded from the other side as his bullets hit one.

"I mean they overshot, the _Okinawa _is picking them up!" Buck answered as he slotted more shells into his shotgun.

"Jesus Christ! This is one Charlie Foxtrot!" Cummings complained as he put a burst in the last alien. The ship was suddenly quiet, save for the panting of the troopers. "Where the hell is the cargo bay anyway?"

"Through that door, reload and get ready to breach." Buck ordered. "Reload is you haven't already."

"Last mag guys." Dominguez said as he shoved his last drum into the bottom of his weapon.

"Stack up, we take this, we can ferry in more guys." Buck announced as he pressed his back against the wall.

"Assuming this thing has a hangar." Freely muttered as he stood at the opposite door.

"It does, don't worry your pretty little head." Dominguez said as he stood behind Buck.

Buck slapped on a hack box and pressed a button. The machine beeped three times then the door opened. Buck charged through the door, followed by the other troopers. "Clear!" buck shouted, scanning his sector. Cummings came in last, grabbing the hack box from the panel.

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

"Clear!" the others shouted back.

"Move in!" Buck ordered, taking point. They were in a hallway of empty cages, some covered in blood, all covered in grime.

"This some kind of prison ship?" Freely asked as the ODSsTs slowly

stalked forward.

"I don't know man, its fuckin creepy that's what it is." Cummings muttered back. They approached another door.

"Positions!" Buck ordered and again the ODSs stacked up on the door. Cummings tossed Buck the hack box and the captain slammed it on the panel. Again the box beeped three times before opening the door. "Breaching!" Buck yelled charging through.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!" Freely yelled, and then the shooting began.

4. Chapter 4

Cargo Hold

Trandosha Slave Ship **_Bone Crusher**_

14:55 Standard UNSC Military Time

Ashoka and her cell mates reeled in shock when the door at the end of the small room suddenly burst open. Four armored beings rushed through the door, weapons raised as they ran headlong into the Trandosha brute.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!" One of the warriors yelled in alarm as he spotted the brute. He and his comrades opened fire on the monster Trandosha, solid rounds pinging off the thick plates strapped to its body.

Slug throwers?! Who uses slug throwers? Ashoka shouted in her mind as the armored figures' weapons barked and roared.

"Keep firing!" another of the armored figures shouted, his armor sporting red accents. The brute staggered back as the firing intensified, but when a series of clicks sounded from the unknown soldiers' weapons, the brute immediately charged forward with a roar. "Look out!" the red accented soldier shouted as they dived out of the way. One of them with a red symbol on its helmet yanked a magazine from a patch in its vest and slammed it into a port another magazine had fallen from. A soldier carrying the largest weapon was too slow and the brute grabbed him by the collar and threw him into the bulkhead. The snapping of bones was heard and he screamed in pain. Moira screamed in horror, shutting her eyes as the sisters clung to each other. Faline tucked herself into a ball and shook with fear. Ashoka ran to the cell door and shook it vigorously. The door didn't budge and she growled in frustration.

"Come on you krifing door, move!" Ashoka yelled, instinctively reaching out to the force. The collars activated and the four prisoners collapsed in a symphony of screams.

Cargo Hold

Trandosha Slave Ship **_Bone Crusher**_

14:57 Standard UNSC Military Time.

As Dominguez fell limp against the wall, Freely let out a curse as he shoved a new magazine into his SMG. The monster lizard charged at him again and he dived out of the way, Cummings pouring rounds into the giant's back. Again the rounds simply bounced off the pitted plates with a clatter. "Our weapons ain't doing shit!" Freely yelled to Buck as the monster charged at Cummings. The medic ducked a swipe and darted around the hulking lizard, retreating out of melee range. Buck pumped another shell into the chamber of his shotgun and fired again. The buck shot plowed into the shoulder plate of the beast and it flinched back. Buck fired again as the monster closed. Loud screams were suddenly heard and the ODSs reflexively searched for a source. Taking advantage of Buck's distraction the monster grabbed him by the neck. Buck gasped for breath as his shotgun tumbled from his grip, hands now locking onto the lizard's wrist. Cummings raced forward, and slammed the butt of his rifle onto the back of the beast's neck. The improvised club glanced off the thick hide and Cummings was thrown back by a vicious backhand. Freely tossed his SMG away, yanked out his combat knife and leapt onto the monster's back.

He rammed his knife into the monster's unprotected neck, green blood gushing from the wound. Dropping the barely conscious Buck the monster lizard frantically tried to yank Freely off of him. Freely unhooked his sidearm from the side and emptied the clip into the back of the monster's head. Blood and gray matter splashed onto Freely's armor as the beast suddenly went limp, crashing to its knees before collapsing in a heap. Freely leapt off the dead lizard's back and raced to Buck, who was struggling to stand.

"You alright captain?" he asked as he steadied his fellow soldier.

"Fine— fine. Get— Dominguez— now." Buck croaked as he took deep breaths. Freely looked for his buddy when he already saw Cummings checking the gunner's pulse, having yanked off Dominguez's helmet. The gunner coughed, blood sputtering from his lips.

"He's hurt pretty bad Captain, broken ribs, puncture lung, spine is pretty fucked up too." Cummings opened his medic bag and yanked out a canister of Biofoam and syringe of Morphine. Plunging the Morphine needle into Dominguez's neck, the gunner relaxed, still laboring to breathe. Ripping off Dominguez's chest plate, he saw bloody holes where his ribs had poked through the skin. Jamming the nozzle of the canister into a wound, pressed down the trigger. White antiseptic foam filled his chest cavity, stopping the bleeding. "He needs a surgeon fast!"

"I'm on it, Jack, search this place for any stragglers and put them down!" He clicked on his helmet mike. "Control this is Mace, we need medical EVAC ASAP, hangar bay is secured but you'll have to cut through the hull over!"

"_Copy Mace, boarding parties are on the way, ETA damn quick, hold on and good luck."_

****Armory****

****Unknown Vessel **_**Redemption**_**

****15:03 Standard UNSC Military Time****

"It's official, military intelligence is a contradictory term!" Swift muttered as he surveyed the large room. Meverston found himself in agreement as they swept the room with their rifles.

"Looks like some kind of armory Sarge." Meverston noted, glancing at the slots in the walls, some holding the large black rifles the clones carried. The abundance of bodies showed how vigourously the clones had tried to defend this place. Swift picked up a small pistol like device from a table and pushed the trigger down experimentally. The weapon barked and a blue bolt of light flew out of the end and impacted a wall, scorching it black.

"Holy shit!" Swift yelled dropping the device.

"What the fuck were you trying to do?!" Harkston roared, yanking the marine away from the weapons.

"That explains why they picked up so much energy, probably powered by batteries." Meverston noted, examining a large box shaped device that was covered in glowing lights. He pulled on one and a small clip came out in his hands.

"Stop touching shit!" Harkston ordered, annoyed. "There should still be a terminal here that link into the ship, let's find it and get out of here!" Meverston put the clip on a table and began looking around. Meverston pointed towards a door leading to a countered kiosk. It was locked if the red lights indicated correctly. "Worth a shot, stack up for breach." The marines quietly placed their backs against the wall. Harkston placed his hacking box on the pad and counted down. "Three, two, one, breach!" He jammed down the box's only button and the door slid open, sending a clone body toppling down on Harkston. Weighed down the marine fell backwards as the Swift rushed in. Meverston yanked the body back and the two marines scrambled away from it, fearing a trap.

"Clear!" Swift yelled from inside the kiosk, looking through the window at his companions. "You guys ok?"

Harkston glanced down at his chest plate fearing acid, but was relieved to only find blood.

"We're good Swift, any terminals in there?" Meverston asked, glancing at the body, the armor having blue highlights. "This guy died fo-." A ragged breath suddenly came from the clone, cutting off Meverston.

"Holy shit, he's alive!" Swift exclaimed and he went for the door.

"Terminal, Swift, the terminal!" Harkston reminded the marine. "Mev, help me get some foam in him, get that armor off!" Meverston knelt down and grabbed the pitted, blackened chest plate of the armor. With a swift tug something snapped and the plate was wrenched free. A holed black body suit was revealed, and blood slowly oozed from a chest wound. Harkston dove his hand into the medpack secured on his lower back and grasped the familiar medal casing. Shoving the canister into a hole, he depressed the trigger. With a splurting sound the foam filled the cavity, sterilizing the wounds and stopping further bleeding. The clone took a less pained breath as the foam haphazardly patched his lung. Meverston jammed a morphine sharpette

into the clone's chest and the wounded soldier relaxed.

"We're in business Sarge!" Swift notified, delighted this trip hadn't been for nought. Harkston tossed him a small cylinder. The other marine caught it and plunged it into the table. A row of status lights slowly lit up until a solid green bar indicated successful data extraction and duplication. "Good to go!" Swift told the others as he slotted the device into an empty ammo pouch on his vest.

"Good, help Mev get this guy ready to move." Harkston clicked on his helmet mike. "Alpha, this is Omega, data secured and have located clone survivor. Is heavily wounded and will require medical attention." Meverston stood from where he had scribbled notes on the clone's helmet indicating what field treatment had been given.

"_Excelent work Omega, return to boarding craft for immediate transport to the Paton, medical teams are on standby, try to keep the clone alive."_

"Understood, Omega out." Harkston replied.

"_This is Charlie, all hostiles neutralized, the ship is secured."_

"_Alpha copies all."_

"**Cargo Hold**"

Trandosha Slave Ship **_Bone Crusher**_

15:06 Standard UNSC Military Time

_Fuck this fucking tub, _Freely muttered in his mind as he carefully searched yet another dark corner. Rows upon rows of empty cages greeted him until he finally reached the end. Then he stopped short. _The hell is that? _Slowly walking forward he noticed four figures prone on the ground. _These fuckers are slavers, good riddance!_ Two were aliens, their matching blue skin and head tails a dead giveaway despite their surprisingly human, feminine forms. Another alien was younger, whose head tails were white with blue stripes that contrasted greatly with its orange skin. It had some form of tribal markings in white on its face. Unlike the rags the other two wore, this one was wearing a tube top and skirt. _Probably a whore. _The fourth figure made him do a double take. All occupants were anatomically female, but this one was human. _Human, how the fuck can that be?! _"Captain, we have a situation!" Freely called through the squad's communication channel.

"_Go ahead corporal."_

"We got slaves sir, three aliens, one human. Better get the doc up here quick!" Freely reported, staring hard at the woman. She was barely over twenty, with red hair and a scarred face.

"_Say again Jack, human?"_

"Yes sir, human." Freely heard heavy footfalls as Cummings raced towards him, large medpack at the ready.

"Get this door open!" Cummings ordered. Freely put a bullet through the lock. The lock fell with a clang and the orange alien girl eye's snapped open. She leapt to her feet, facing the ODSTs with a determined look on her face. Cumming tried to step forward but she lashed out with frightening speed, catching him by the helmet with a booted foot. He recoiled back and held his hands up plantetively. Freely snapped his SMG up as the girl put herself between the troopers and her cellmates, who were beginning to stir. "Easy now, I'm just trying to help." She didn't looked convinced, tightening her stance. The two blue alines gasped and clung to each other, the woman backed up in fear. _Fuck, it's like Tribute all over again._

"Who are you?" the girl asked, stern and commanding. Freely and Cummings started as the girl spoke in English.

"You speak English?" Freely asked, an uneasy feeling rising in his stomach. _Impossible._

The girl looked at him in confusion. "You mean Basic, right?" Freely was about to correct her when Cummings cut him off.

"Yes, we meant Basic. We're ODSTs, I'm a medic, and I want to make sure you're not gonna die on us." He said matter-of-factly, pointing to the red cross on his helmet for emphasis.

"We're fine, and I've never heard of 'ODSTs' before." The girl said, eyeing them suspiciously.

"_Get them prepped for transport Doc, evac is cutting through now." _Buck's voice sounded over their helmet comms. A slight sizzling was heard and the girl's eyes looked frantically for the source.

"It's a boarding craft, one of ours, we're getting you off of this bucket." Freely said, growing exasperated with the whole mess. _I just wanna get this over with so I can sort this out._

"We leaving, really?" one of the blue aliens asked, incredulous. Jack nearly slapped his face in frustration. _Fucking civilians, fucking ALIEN civilians. _

"For fuck's sake yes, now let the doc take a look to see if you'll live!" Freely practically yelled, close to losing his patience, the flashback of the slaughter on Tribute not helping. The girl finally nodded and Cummings went to work, quickly and methodically cleaning wounds, cursing every time he found a lash from a whip or a brand. With a clatter a boarding ship broke through the shielded hangar door and a squad of marines stormed out and formed a semi-circle around the opening. Buck joined the other men as corspmen carried Dominguez onto the boarding craft.

"Mount up, we're getting outta here, get these civies on board, the captain of the _Patton _wants a word with you." The girl, her brow furrowed in confusion and suspicion, nodded and lead her group to the craft, earning odd looks from the marines.

This is one huge cluster fuck.

****Republic Assault Ship **_**Leveler**_**

****Hyper Space****

****Enroute to stricken cruiser **_**Redemption**_**

****15:34 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Anakin Skywalker spun on his heel and paced to the opposite side of the bridge. Captain Pellaeon sighed inwardly as he tracked the young Jedi's movement across the bridge. He caught a couple of the clones glancing nervously at the general's behavior before returning to their tasks. _I'd be worried too if my charge had been lost in Wild Space._

"How much longer Captain?" Anakin asked, turning again to walk to center where he stood with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Fifteen standard units sir, we're making best possible speed." Pellaeon reminded the general as he saw the frown form.

"_Calm yourself Anakin, I'm sure that whatever Ashoka has encountered, she and Rex can handle. They did assist Pellaeon and she was in that ambush by Boba Fett." _Obi-wan Kenobi reminded, trying to calm his friend's thoughts.

"I know, I know, but what could take down a cruiser out here?" Anakin asked, anxiety not at all lessened. R2-D2 beeped a few times, offering his own opinion on the matter. "I don't think pirates have that kind of firepower buddy, sorry." The astromech beeped again in admittance of the impossibility of such an event then settled to just watching Anakin resume pacing, dome rotating slowly as he tracked the young man.

"_You're gonna put a trench in the deck at this rate Anakin, I suggest you meditate."_ Obi-wan suggested.

"I will alert you when we near the beacon sir, I'm sure _Leveler_ and her destroyer escorts can handle anything we find." Pellaeon added, hoping he could convince the Jedi to leave the bridge. As fine a leader as Anakin was, his lack of resolve wasn't helping the morale of the bridge crew, and if whatever had disabled Tano's ship was still there, he needed them as fit as can be.

"Alright," Anakin relented, shrugging his shoulders slightly. "But it's _exactly _when we exit Hyperspace and no later."

"Wouldn't dream of not being punctual sir, as you order." Pellaeon replied, earning a slight grin. Turning on a heel, Anakin left the bridge and headed to his quarters.

****Interrogation Room A-2****

****Destroyer **_**Patton**_** (DD-76)****

****15:34 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Ashoka looked at the small room she was seated in with concern. After having removed their collars, the medical staff had cleaned cuts,

burned the three slave's rags, and made sure they all ate and showered. Once Ashoka had had her fill of a warm shower, she was given a clean robe and led here, where a large meal of what the lieutenant escorting her had called "eggs, bacon, and toast" was waiting with a tall glass of water with a pitcher. She had been left alone since and after having consumed her meal, she was frankly concerned she had traded one cell for another. Suddenly, the door opened with a slight hiss and in walked a younger man in a grey uniform with ribbons and a medal on his upper left chest as well as a type of pistol secured in a holster on his leg. Behind him were two of the so called "ODSTs" she had encountered on the slave ship. They were dressed in matte black armor with fingerless gloves and a helmet with an opaque visor through which she could not see their faces. One was carrying a rifle with some type of scope on a rail while the other a small box.

"Hello miss, I trust your meal was satisfactory?" the uniformed man asked, sitting across from her.

"It was good, I've never had anything like it." Ashoka answered cautiously. The man smiled slightly.

"No, I figured you wouldn't have. Before we begin in earnest, we found a clone still alive onboard your vessel, he is being treated right now and we were hoping you could identify him so the medical team can assist him by name. We recovered his armor and his helmet." He motioned to the ODST holding the box and the soldier placed it on the table. Ashoka reached in and pulled out Rex's helmet.

"Thank the Force, it's Rex!" Ashoka cried in relief.

"Rex? That is the clone's name?" the man asked carefully.

"Yes, thank you for finding him!" Ashoka said, happily placing the helmet back in the box.

"You're welcome, but that's not the reason I called you here. Now then, what are you doing here on the border of United Earth Government space?"

"Why are you asking me, why single me out?" Ashoka asked, suspicion growing.

"We recovered files from your ship, Redemption, and found your dossier. You are Ashoka Tano correct?" the man replied calmly, pouring himself a glass from the half drained pitcher.

"Yeah, I'm Ashoka, how did you get the files, they were encrypted!" Ashoka was really getting concerned now. She had never heard of this "United Earth Government" and if they had never heard of Trandoshans then what else were they oblivious too?

"We're getting off topic, what was your mission here miss Tano?" the man politely steered the conversation back to his question.

"It's commander Tano, and who are you?" Ashoka replied.

"I'm Captain Wheeler, and you are aboard my ship, now what was your mission?" a slight edge had formed on Wheeler's voice, showing his waning patience.

"Like I would tell you, how do I know you're not CIS?" Ashoka answered sharply.

"CIS?" Wheeler responded, confused. "Who are the CIS?"

"How could you not know?! We're at war with them!" Ashoka too was getting annoyed.

"We didn't, and who is 'we'?" the captain replied, confusion heavy in his voice as well as frustration.

"The Republic!" Ashoka answered, her own frustration rising.

"Republic? We don't know who that is! Now tell me, why the hell were trying to enter UEG space!?" the captain practically roared, rising to his feet. Ashoka reached into the Force, reading his presence to see if the man was lying. What she found was shocking. Instead of a pulsing tendril of Force energy she found a blank gray space, still registering as a life force, but with no other presence besides. Not only the captain, she realized in shock, but every member of the ship's crew. "Commander Tano? Miss are you listening? Get a nurse, her face is losing color!" the captain sounded panicked now.

"You have no Force signature!" Ashoka whispered in shock.

"What?" the captain asked, relieved she wasn't suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder like the human woman they recovered.

"You have no Force signature!" Ashoka repeated, her voice rising in astonishment and fear.

"Force signature, what the- never mind that! Look, I need to know if you or this war you are in is a threat to my people. So I will ask again commander, why were you trying to enter UEG space?"

"We weren't trying to do anything to your space, the Republic does not know you exist!" Ashoka answered, annoyed by the constant questioning.

"Impossible, the UEG and the UNSC have been here for over a hundred years!" the captain replied, concern and confusion rapt in his voice.

"You didn't know about the Republic or the Confederacy of Independent Systems!" Ashoka shot back.

"But we, and you, son of a bitch! There was an entire civilization out there and we never knew about it!" Wheeler cried in exasperation. "This is big, very big, this is gonna change everything."

"Ok, can I ask you a question?" Ashoka asked tentively.

"Sure, why not?" the captain replied, regaining his composure.

"What is the United Earth Government?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, any information has been classified by the UNSC to any unknown civilizations we encounter." The captain

responded crisply as if he rehearsed it.

"UNSC?"

"United Nations Space Command, the military branch."

"Oh, so that's where this ship is from." Ashoka said, connecting the dots.

"Yes, our recon-." Another uniformed man rushed in, a pad in his hands.

"Captain, four ships just appeared on our sensors, they match the shape of the derelict!" the man who ran in reported, handing the pad to Wheeler.

"ETA?" Wheeler asked, rushing to his feet.

"Six minutes sir." The crewman replied, looking eager to get back to his post.

"Sound general quarters and heat up the MAC gun, tell the _St. Lo_ and _Okinawa_ to stand off at 20,000 meters from our port and starboard side. Troopers, escort Commander Tano back to the medical ward. Do not let her speak to the clone until we contact the incoming vessels." Wheeler ordered, already racing to the door.

"Yes sir!" the rifle baring trooper replied and motioned for Ashoka to follow him. "Come with me ma'am."

****Republic Assault Ship **_**Leveler**_**

****Last known position of the cruiser **_**Redemption**_**

****16:10 Standard UNSC Military Time****

As the _Leveler_ slowed from Hyperspace, Anakin felt excitement and nervousness bubble up from where his meditation had forced it down. As the brilliant white and blue dissipated he was greeted with a sight that he had dreaded seeing. The _Redemption_ was crippled, boarded, and abandoned. Attached to the cruiser was a number of boarding craft, their sources clearly Trandoshan raid ships.

"Slavers." Anakin muttered as three other vessels immediately caught his attention. They were matte gray except for white letters that spelled out something not in Galactic Standard but old time Basic. Two of the smaller vessels were identical except for their markings, one was labeled _Okinawa_ and the other _St. Lo_. They're rectangular forms very utilitarian, the prow jutting out of a rectangle and four parallel spars from the rear, where engines pulsed. The middle ship was larger than the others, and was a consistent rectangular prism, lacking the spars of the other ships. It was labeled _Patton_. All of the vessels were labeled "UNSC" with a bird clutching a planet in its talons with stars surrounding it. "Whose ships are those? What is the UNSC?" Anakin asked Pelleaon.

"I don't know sir, we don't have any record of ships of these type." Pelleaon replied, confused.

"Sound general quarters, get the weapons systems ready to fire in case things get hot. Get me communications with that lead ship!"

Anakin ordered, pacing towards the screen.

"Sir, unknown vessel is already hailing." The communications officer replied.

"Patch them through." The holographic screen lit up and a young man looked at them in slight surprise. "Who are you, what have you done with my Padawan?" Anakin demanded.

"Are you from the Republic?" the man asked, glancing at something off camera.

"Yes, now where is my Padawan?!" Anakin demanded again, growing agitated.

"Padawan? We know of no Padawan. Are you referring to Commander Ashoka Tano?" the man asked, confused.

"Off course I am, she's a Jedi!" Anakin replied, losing his patience.

"Jedi, what is a Jedi?" the man in turn asked again, very confused.

"How can you not have heard of the Jedi, we've been keeping peace for thousands of years!"

"We just learned of your existence after my meeting with your 'Padawan.'" The man replied, still confused.

"Impossible! Who are you people anyway?" Anakin asked.

"We're soldiers of the United Nations Space Command, defenders of the United Earth Government." The man answered with no small amount of pride.

"Did you attack our cruiser?" Pellaon asked, trying to refocus the conversation.

"Negative, we found the cruiser as it sits. Now that you are here, what are your intentions?"

"I want to get my padawan and any other crewmen you recovered back."

"Then you will leave?" the man asked, skeptical.

"If you give them back, yes."

"Very well, you may send one transport to collect them, they are onboard my ship." Following the captain's reply, Anakin tested his truth in the Force, and found the man a grey void, lacking all but the conformation that he was indeed a living being. _No Force signature, what are these people?_

"As you wish, a single transport is being readied as I speak, try anything funny and we will retaliate." Anakin threatened, unable to fully trust the captain's words.

"So will we, _Patton _out."

_A/N: I hate these things, but I feel the need to explain something. I'm sorry if this chapter seems off, but after not posting in a while I wanted to make sure the story continued. Please feel free to applaud, critique, or condemn this chapter as you wish. I am not eloquent on these kinds of encounters and if it seems like a matter is suddenly dropped it is because both sides have faced a rush of shocking revelations. I will address any issues in this chapter and will follow suggestions if I feel them relevant to the plot in due time. Any first readers know I'm good about this, but this chapter may remain like this for awhile. Do not let it dissuade you, there is more to come that is hopefully better than this. Life is very hectic and again I wanted all those waiting to see how the "Redemption Incident" concludes. Things will pick up from here and I will try to get chapters out soon. My priority right now is to not leave my readers hanging for months because of my busy life. Quality may drop slightly, but it WILL be addressed once I get a breather. Thank you for reading and I hope you will stay with me on this adventure- Arm Chair General _

6. Chapter 6

****Galactic Senate****

****Courscant****

****Andromeda Galaxy****

****3 Months Later****

****1:23 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Senator Amidala walked out of the Galactic Senate Chamber in a rush. It had been three months since the United Earth Government had been found and the Senate had finally agreed to send an envoy, her. No doubt the Confederacy had already sent their ambassador to the UEG and were already trying to win over the previously unknown human civilization to their cause. As Amidala all but ran to her airspeeder, her guards easily kept pace. Suddenly, her communicator rang. Grabbing the device she pushed a button and held it to her ear. "Amidala."

"Senator, this is Skywalker." Anakin's voice made her heart flutter, her secret husband's words comforting. He had survived the war so far.

"How can I help you Anakin?" Amidala asked, sticking to the formalities to avoid suspicion.

"I am just notifying you that Master Kenobi will not be able to join you on your mission to the United Earth Government." Amidala had gotten the message from the Temple as she had settled her stand back into its slot in the Senate Chamber after the request by herself and the Senate for him to accompany her. Anakin was just using this as an excuse to talk to her.

"I see, thank you Anakin, I will plan accordingly."

"That is all, may the Force be with you." _Stay safe, come

home._

"And with you." _You too._

**Punworcca**** 116-class Interstellar Sloop**

Kohlma High Orbit

Andromeda Galaxy

14:12 Standard UNSC Military Time

Count Dooku, otherwise count as Darth Tyrannus, settled into his seat and answered his master's call. The cloaked figure of his master, Lord Sidious, flashed into being. "What is thy bidding my master?" Dooku asked, bowing his head in respect.

"You are aware that the Republic has made contact with a human civilization deep in Wild Space?" his master asked. Dooku had been aware, his spies in the Senate had notified of an emergency meeting to figure out what to do about this "United Earth Government."

"Yes master, my informants have notified me, am I to make diplomatic contact?" Dooku was inferring that his master would want these people on the Confederacy's side, their destruction of a raiding force of Trandoshans and the rescue of a Jedi had put them in great favor in the eyes of Republic citizens, yet the UEG's ignorance to both sides of the war was shocking.

"Yes my apprentice, you are to do so, sway them to our cause or threaten them with force. We cannot have them side with the Republic, their involvement will bolster the Republic's thinly stretched army."

"It shall be done, I shall not fail you." Dooku replied, bowing.

"See that you don't, the coordinates have been sent to you." The hologram disappeared as his master cut the connection. Dooku thumbed an intercom to the pilot droid.

"Set our course for the coordinates, best speed. We have to beat the Republic's emissary."

"Yes sir." The droid replied and extended the solar sails. The sloop began moving, getting to a safe distance before jumping to hyperspace.

UNSC Space Station **_Geneva**_

UEG Border

Milky Way Galaxy

One Day Later

13:12 Standard UNSC Military Time

Ambassador Arnold Sampson dabbed his head with a handkerchief as the Confederate emissary's ship eased into the hangar. The strange ship

had jumped into the same spot as the "_Redemption _Incident" claiming to be an envoy from the Confederacy of Independent Systems, the collection of planets currently at war with the Galactic Republic. After being ordered to jump 1500 meters off the station's port side, it traveled under the guns of the prowling frigates and the battleship _Macbeth_ to the station's hangar. The station had been built as a place where the UEG could meet with the United Houses of Sanghelios without either side having to make an arduous journey to their respective home worlds, thus prompting a UNSC naval presence encase of attack. It was also Sampson's home away from home when he wasn't visiting the Sangheli. As the ship settled on its three landing struts the Marine honor guard, in their dress uniforms, formed at either side of the ambassador, their rifles accented with artificial wood. A ramp lowered from the vessel and a man in long robes walked calmly down, flanked by two bipedal robots carrying strange, small guns. The honor guard began to sweat beneath their uniforms as Sampson stepped forward, offering a polite hand. "I am Ambassador Sampson, representative of the United Earth Government." The man looked at the ambassador's hand before grasping it lightly and shaking it.

"Lord Tyrannus." The white haired, bearded man replied in kind.

"If you would follow me, we have much to discuss." Sampson pointed the way with his arm and Tyrannus walked briskly, his two robots following. The marines flanked Sampson as the pair made their way to the board room.

****Republic Diplomatic Frigate **_**Diplomacy**_**

****300 meters from UNSC Space Station****

****13:24 Standard UNSC Military Time ****

Padme Amidala watched as the fields of stars gave way to a massive space station. It was a long, wide tube that had multiple circular sections surrounding it. As it rotated the name _Geneva _was seen in the same Basic that all UEG vessels displayed. Four of the UNSC frigates were visible, standing off from the station in a square formation. Docked to the station was a massive vessel Padme hadn't seen before. It was easily double the length of an assault ship and was painted the same utilitarian grey that all UNSC vessels flaunted. Its large side cannons tracked their approach, as did the two frigates closest to her ship.

"Senator, we are being hailed by the station." The communications officer reported. He was a clone like the rest of those who operated the small vessel. The view screen lit up and a graying man glared at them.

"State your business here!" he ordered, voice full of authority.

"We are the Republic's diplomatic envoy, here to meet with their ambassador." Padme replied, not intimidated.

"I see, the Separatists ambassador is already here. You may land a single shuttle in the hangar bay. Two guards may accompany you if you wish. Any attempts to harm or impede the other envoy will be met with your swift removal from this station where you will be escorted out of the system. Any attempts you make to return will be viewed as a

threat and met with deadly force. Do I make myself clear?" Padme was taken aback by the hostility but regained her composure.

"No, we understand thank you." Padme replied.

"Then you may land at your leisure, that is all." The call ended and the screen went dark. _What a rude man, and the Separatists are already here!_

"Please prepare a shuttle, I wish to leave at once." Padme half ordered as she went to secure her documents.

"Right away senator." The frigate's captain replied as Padme left the bridge. _I just hope I have time to sway them to our side; the Republic can't afford any enemies._

****Meeting Room****

****UNSC Space Station **_**Geneva**_**

****20 Minutes Later****

****13:44 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Sampson rubbed his head in frustration as the two envoys went into yet another argument. Both had equally sharp tongues and while he was impressed with their debating skills and the hatred they showed for one another, the meeting was getting nowhere. "The Republic can provide extensive trade opportunities for businesses, and its army can protect your worlds." Padme pitched as Tyrannus broke into a grin.

"I do not believe these people need military support, but if they did the Droid Army is more than superior. The Banking Clan has more monetary wealth and will pay top dollar for your goods, of that I can assure you." Tyrannus shot back, a smug grin on his face.

"Enough! My government does not care about whose side is better; the UEG will remain neutral in this conflict. We will trade equally with both and our ships are not to be targeted by merchant raiders." Sampson interjected, patience evaporated.

"But the CIS is a great threat to your people. They are corrupt, unjust!" Padme announced, gesturing to Tyrannus.

"The only corrupt government is the Senate my dear," Tyrannus accused. "They'll turn on your people in an instant if it can further their careers and line their pockets."

"Did you not hear what I said?! The UEG will remain a neutral party; you either accept our terms or leave us alone. We have no desire to ally with either the Republic or the Confederacy, nor do we desire being a trade partner if you do not accept our terms. We were just fine before we knew you existed. Now again, we will conduct equal trade with both sides, our ships are to have diplomatic immunity and not be considered enemy shipping, embassies will be established on both capital worlds, and any attack on our ships will be viewed as a declaration of war! Are these terms acceptable?" Sampson practically shouted, gesturing to the paper in front of him.

"The Senate will have to vote on it, but I believe so." Padme replied, taking the copy Sampson offered. The UEG president had already signed it.

"I can sign it now ambassador, my government has given me the authority." Tyrannus lied as he signed his name with a flourish.

"Excellent, we shall wait for the Republic's reply and begin work to establish an embassy as well as shipping offices on the seven worlds you wish to accept goods from the Milky Way. Now then, I shall see you out."

****UNSC Research and Development Ship **_**Trial and Error**_**
(RDS-2)****

****Deep Space ****

****400 Light Years from Reach****

****15:02 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Doctor Arnold Buscott rubbed his eyes as he typed in one final code. The screen lit up green and warm up status appeared, a black bar the gradually filled from left to right.

"Tesla, status?" Buscott asked, stretching from his terminal. He and his fellow scientists had been working on project AEGIS nonstop for the past three months. Using captured Forerunner and Covenant technology in addition to a sample ship donated by the Sangheli, they were attempting to outfit UNSC vessels with something they had been longing for since the first contact with the Covenant, shielding. During the Human-Covenant War, attempts had been made to replicate Covenant shielding on human vessels. Project AEGIS had been in off and on commencement since the war began, but as more worlds fell and an accident caused the complete particle disintegration, destroying the frigate Hypothesis with all her crew and researchers, the project was shutdown in an effort to focus on the SPARTAN program and other successful weapons projects. At war's end, there was a debate whether to reactivate AEGIS, but the long and tedious process of terraforming the worlds burned by plasma again spelled doom for the project. It wasn't until the discovery of alien life in the Andromeda galaxy and the Redemption incident that AEGIS was finally given the green light. Now, they were ready to test the generators, focus arrays, and holding systems to see if shielding was as practical for the UNSC as it was for the Covenant.

"Generators running at optimum capacity, shields ready to begin charging." Tesla replied, his light blue form appearing on his pedestal.

"Light it." Buscott ordered. A crackling enveloped the ship and the hairs of Buscott's arm stood up. An alarm sounding that the shields had reached two percent sounded before shutting off as the level rose.

"50 percent, 60 percent, 85 percent, 97 percent, fully charged." Tesla reported as he monitored the ship's systems.

"Test automatic recharge." Buscott ordered. There was a snap as a

high yield EMP mine exploded from the frigate _Ulysses_. There was a snap as the shields dissipated; the hardening of the wires prevented the loss of total power. The alarm sounded again, but then faded as before.

"Shields recharging at constant rate, no power surges or loss of coverage. Shields fully charged." Tesla reported.

"Again." Buscott ordered and another EMP was deployed and detonated. There was no cracking noise, but once more the warning alarm sounded before fading. Buscott was giddy with excitement. _ We did it!_

"Recharge rate constant, coverage complete, power output consistent, shields fully charged." Tesla slated again. A cheer sounded from the engineers and researchers and Buscott found himself joining in. AEGIS was a success; the UNSC had shielding that could rival any other race. As the celebration commenced and champagne began to flow, the newest breakthrough in human science had arrived just in time for the UNSC to once again return to the battlefield. The powder had been laid, the fuse primed, and all it would take was a single spark. War was imminent.

7. Chapter 7

****Cruise Ship **_**Carnival**_**

****Coreilla Space Port****

****1 Month Later****

****13:03 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Captain Maria Bougart entered the bridge, arms clasped calmly behind her back. She had been with the Solar Sails Cruises for 2 years and knew the routine by heart. "Have the last of the passengers been brought onboard?"

"Yes captain, we are set to close docking bays." First Mate Tim Taylor replied, checking the reports from the greeters.

"Excellent, let's get set to put her out among the stars."

"Ma'am, we got activity on the dock!" Navigator Officer Lauren Sleinhart shouted, pointing out the view screen. Bougart stepped up to the screen and looked out. Masked men were charging towards the ship, weapons drawn. The security officers halted them but they were quickly gunned down.

"Seal the ship now!" Bougart ordered and the docking bay doors began to close. Watching through the security camera she saw one of the greeters get shot in the face, crumpling to the deck. Dozens of the attackers raced onboard the ship before the doors sealed, blocking the rest. "Hit the distress beacon, get the armory open!" Taylor quickly pounded out the commands on his terminal. A small slot in the wall opened, dispensing three M6G pistols and a Remington 6650 Police Shotgun. "Secure the bridge, wipe the navigation records, and get me a link with the security teams!"

****Security Booth 12****

****Cruise Ship **_**Much Ado About Nothing**_**

****13:11 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Officer Chuck Sanders ducked behind the wall of his booth as more lasers soared over head. Hundreds of guests were dead, their bodies littered on the ground. Others had been beaten unconscious and were who know where. The ship had become a death trap, and the battered remnants of the security team were all that stood between the surviving guests and untimely death. Sanders popped up from behind cover and fired more shots at the intruders. One fell, blood spurting from his chest. The others immediately opened fire and he ducked back down. A beep sounded and the armory slot opened up in the booth, an arm holding out a CA-5 rifle. _Thank the Lord!_ He crawled to it and slotted a magazine into the well. Racking the bolt, he turned to see a masked attacker whip around the corner. Sanders pumped the trigger, the semi-automatic rifle, kicking into his chest. A round caught the top of the attacker's head, blowing it off a spew of gore. The corpse fell, brain matter oozing onto the tile floor. _Oh my god!_ More gunfire sounded from down the hall and the masked men retreated, returning fire with their laser rifles and pistols. Four security officers charged down the hall. One was struck in the chest and fell. As the attackers retreated the other officers raced to the booth. "Christ Chuck, aren't you a sight for sore eyes!" one of the officers, Sergeant Jerry Rowe, helped to his feet.

"Thanks, what's going on?" Sanders asked, glancing at the dead passengers.

"Bastards charged us, most of the security team is dead, we're all that's left." Rowe replied, cradling his shotgun.

"And we will be too if we don't open those doors!" a young officer announced. He was a new guy, and his tag read Yuckers.

"We can't, only the bridge can open them!" Rowe said, pointing towards the area.

"Then we gotta ge-." Yuckers was cut off as his head exploded. Blood splattered the remaining officers and Sanders dove back in his booth. Popping over the edge he saw a dozen masked men charging towards them, weapons spewing deadly red bolts. Rowe ducked behind a pillar, firing a shell at the mob. One staggered and fell, pellets tearing into his leg and groin. The officer who had remained quiet reeled back as he was stabbed in the gut. Sanders emptied his magazine and the knife wielding enemy fell. Rowe ducked around his pillar again and was riddled with lasers. His blackened corpse slid down the pillar, crumpling to the floor. Sanders popped up again, only for his rifle to click empty. He ducked back down and saw a spherical device bounce off the booth's back wall and clatter to the floor. It began beeping rapidly.

"Oh shi-." A flash, and then nothing.

****Bridge****

****Cruise Ship **_**Much Ado About Nothing**_**

****13:21 Standard UNSC Military Time****

"I can't raise the security teams!" Communications Officer Melinda Hurgert announced, panic seeping into her voice.

"All the security cameras show is blood and bodies!" Taylor reported, horrified. "The terrorists are the only ones alive. Shit, the screen's gone dark, they must be jamming them. Suddenly, a hissing noise sounded from the bridge door.

"They're cutting through!" Melinda cried, ducking behind her station.

"Get ready!" Sanders ordered, readying her shotgun. The doors parted and blaster bolts filled the doorway. Tim was shot in the neck, releasing an arc of blood as his neck pivoted back. Lauren was splattered with blood and began screaming. Sanders fired a shell and pumped the slide. Melinda was wrapped in a ball, panicking. Lauren popped up from behind her console and emptied her pistol's magazine. Five terrorists fell when Sanders took a bolt in the gut. She was thrown backwards and landed with a cry. Lauren received a bolt to the face, half her head boiling away. The masked terrorists raced in and tied up Melinda and Sanders while putting a coup de grace into the two other dead crewmen. Both officers were thrown in a chair, hands and legs tied. Sanders could feel her blood seeping from the wound. Her uniform had a growing black stain and blood began to roll down her legs and into her boots. A terrorist with a red mask walked up to her and slapped her across the face.

"What is the access code to the controls?" he demanded, slapping her again.

"555-334-Go Fuck Yourself!" Sanders replied bitterly, spitting in his face. She received another slap and pulled out a vibroblade. The weapon hummed softly, shimmering slightly in the emergency lighting.

"Tell me or I start removing fingers!" the masked man threatened, waving the knife in front of her face.

"Ok, first, you â€"ugh- red lever, then you shove it up you're as-." She was cut off as her left hand went crashing to the floor. Sanders yelled in pain then gritted her teeth, panting heavily.

"You have five chances left, if I'm merciful."

"For fuck's sake tell him Sanders!" Melinda begged, being forced to watch. The red masked man spun around as if remembering Melinda.

"How about you, what are the codes?!"

"Don't tell them Melinda!"

"Tell me and you will live!"

"I didn't sign up for this Maria!" Melinda cried, finality in her voice.

"No, don't te-!" The masked man plunged the blade into her neck and

she began to gurgle, world growing blacker and blacker.

"The access code is 'Trade Winds'." Melinda said, dejected. As Sander's life began to fade, she saw the mask man type the code in, nod in satisfaction, and slit Melinda's throat.

"Set a course for UEG Space, their data may be wiped, but we know where they are. Glory for the Republic awaits!"

****UNSC Destroyer **_**Patton **_**(DD-76)****

****Orbital Refueling Station **_**Banquet**_**

****Harvest Orbit****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Five Days Later****

****7:43 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Captain Arthur Wheeler sipped his mug of coffee calmly as the crew began the refueling process. The coolant that kept the reactor from overheating had to be replaced after every four cruises to prevent possible meltdowns. In addition to coolant, the ship also refueled its fresh water tanks, fuel supply for the fighters, and food for the crew. This process was long, tedious, but safe. Thus, Wheeler had nothing to be concerned about except burning his tongue. Patton materialized on his podium and saluted.

"Coolant and water lines are secured, pumping process has begun," he reported, "Estimated time to completion, 55 minutes."

"Thank you Patton, inform me of any problems." Wheeler replied, taking another sip from his cup. It was a gift from his wife, with the UNSC Eagle emblazoned on it and the words "Love you, come home safe sailor!" written along the edge. _Damn do I miss her._

"Yes sir!" Patton confirmed, saluting crisply and fading from view. Wheeler watched as the carrier _New Mombasa_ eased slowly to a refueling port, technicians already in EVA suits ready to attach lines. Suddenly, a slipspace portal opened and a cruise liner came rocketing out. _Huh, guess someone is in a hurry._ The ship slowed to a stop, turned and began heading in a new direction towards the station. The station's all ships frequency squawked once.

"_Cruise ship _Carnival_, please alter your course, this is a military refueling station and is closed to civilian vessels._" The ship did not reply and remained on course. "_I say again, change your course. _Carnival_ do you understand? We WILL fire on you, turn about now!"_ Patton materialized, frantic.

"Captain, that ship is on a direction collision course to the station!"

"Get this ship uncoupled now!" Wheeler ordered, thumbing the key on his chair

"_Destroyer _Patton_, fire a warning shot across their bow."_ The station's executive officer ordered.

Wheeler pressed the talk key. "Understood, we are getting unhooked now." The cruise ship suddenly accelerated. A frigate moved to cut off the large ship, deck guns aimed threateningly. The large civilian vessel slammed into the smaller warship, sending the frigate spiraling and venting atmosphere. _The fuck?!_ The Emergency Notification Channel blared it's siren, catching the attention of all onboard.

"_ALL SHIPS, BE ON ALERT FOR THE CRUISE SHIP _CARNIVAL. _SAID VESSEL HAS BEEN CAPTURED BY UNKNOWN ASSALIANTS ON COREILLA AS OF FIVE DAYS AGO. IF LOCATED, DESTROY IMMEDIATELY. REPEAT, DESTROY THE CRUISE SHIP _CARNIVAL!"

"_Belay that order Patton, all ships scatter! This is the station Banquet, rogue cruise ship is on collision course, need assistance!"_

"We're clear sir." Paton reported.

"Flank speed, get us clear and get the MAC ready to fire!"

"Aye sir, flank speed." Pruitt echoed and the destroyer began to rumble forward. The station's point defense guns opened fire, the small cannons tearing into the unarmored hull of the _Carnival_. An Orbital Defense Platform began to rotate, trying to bring its Super MAC to bear on the _Carnival._

"Sir, firing solution achieved." Patton said, binoculars in his hand.

"Fire!" The destroyer shuddered and the round slammed into the ship. A large chunk of the upper decks was torn away. "Shit, it's not stopping." The _New Mombasa _was still docked to the ship, one of the lines tangled up with a RADAR dish.

"Impact in four!" Patton announced and began counting down. The _New Mombasa _sheared off its dish and surged away, its own guns firing over the station. "Three, two, one!" The flaming, damaged ship plowed into the station, slamming through its decks. The cruise ship bent and splintered amid ship before detonating, it's reactor critical. Debris slammed into the _Patton, _buckling plates. The fireball engulfed the station and the carrier, the energy wave slamming into the destroyer. The _Patton _lurched and Wheeler was thrown to the deck.

"Hull breach in sectors 5A, 7B, and all of E deck, sealing now!" Patton declared. The ship stabilized and Wheeler looked back at the station. A mass of twisted metal was all that remained, the cruise ship and station fusing in the heat. The forward half of the carrier was gone, and the remaining half was engulfed in flames. The frigate that had raced to assist had a gaping hole in its port side, bodies and atmosphere venting rapidly.

"Holy shit." Wheeler muttered as he stared at the destruction. Rescue ships raced to the scene, recovery vehicles hurrying to save those that were left. A fire fighting ship began spraying the now shortened _New Mombasa _before the carrier's reactor too went critical, obliterating itself and the fire ship.

"Sir, hull breach is contained, wounded is in the medical bay, orders?" Hafflax asked, ending the stunned silence on the bridge.

"Get us into position to assist the frigate and get Fernson on the horn, I want to let him know what happened so we can get the bastards who did this."

_A/N: Here I am again with one of these. This chapter was edited in response to the massive outcry about the details of this chapter. It was a failure in my part for not thoroughly explaining that the cruise ship was a civilian vessel, no more under the UNSC's control than Delta Airlines is under the U.S. Air Force's. The inclusion of the warning message was to help solidify the UNSC's ability to monitor its vessels and give due reason for the ships and platform to open fire. The cruise ship now travels slowly towards the refueling station to make it appear that it is a confused civilian vessel. On regards to how the ship was captured, it was charged and while some terrorists did make it in, most got locked out. As to why the UNSC would mourn the loss of a station and collection of ships less than the wartime losses of the Human-Covenant War, terrorism is a very real threat and the UEG will react like any nation that is attacked, wipe out the terrorists to prevent such an event from ever happening again. Innocent blood has been spilled, and for a people living in the wake of genocide who have cherished the lack of bloodshed, there can be no greater offense. In the end, this is my story, and despite it seeming to be a weak chapter, it is merely the first step in the long road ahead. I hope this didn't dissuade any readers, if you had wanted a different way for the UNSC to be brought to a war footing feel free to write your own story. As always, thank you to those who have put up with me so far and I hope the following chapters won't be as big a disappointment as this one seemed to be. â€"Arm Chair General _

8. Chapter 8

_A/N: Before this chapter begins, I would like to notify those who pointed out the many flaws of the previous chapter that it has been edited and I welcome you to read it again if you have not already. If you are new and have only seen the edited version, the reviews will tell you what was wrong if you are curious. Now then, onto Chapter 8!

—

****Briefing Room****

****Presidential Residence****

****Former Country of Switzerland****

****Earth****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Six Days Later****

****10:21 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Admiral Richard Fernson glared into his coffee cup. He had been waiting in this room for over an hour as the rest of the admirals,

generals, intelligence correspondents, and the president arrived. _Token of efficiency we are._ As the president, Charles Gandler, settled into his chair, he raised his hand apologetically. "Sorry ladies and gentlemen, my meeting with the Arbiter went longer than intended, let us begin." Director Harrison Smith nodded and powered on the glass display on the far wall.

"Mr. President, admirals and generals of the United Nations Space Command, as of six days ago one of our refueling stations was rammed by the hijacked cruise ship _Carnival_. The ship was reported hijacked eleven days ago by Coreillan Port Authorities." An image of the _Carnival_ was projected on the screen, the large vessel painted white with red and yellow stripes traveling its length. "The ship jumped immediately and slipped through our satellite grid before it was reported. The loss of life is not entirely known but the current count is over 1,500. We were able to recover the _Carnival's_ black box," the image changed to that of a battered, bright orange box resting on the hangar deck of a warship. "The box recorded all conversations on the bridge up to the point of impact. All this information is on your pads." Fernson raised his hand.

"It says here that all recording devices were shutdown, how was the black box able to record?"

"The device is locked under a level 7 encryption similar to what we use for classified documents. Only ONI or The Bureau of Interstellar Safety can access the information. Also the files are under the title 'Pool Chlorine Stores.' The pools do not use Chlorine." Fernson grinned slightly.

"This is all well and good Director but who attacked us?" Lord Terrance Hood asked through his video link. The elderly man was in a medical bed, having suffered a heart attack.

"Allow me to play the necessary recording." The director pushed a button on his pad and the speakers crackled.

"-we know where they are. Glory to the Republic awaits! Doruma, power down the security systems, Morunston, get us away from the dock."

"Roger roger."

"Fool! Don't reply audibly until the recorders are off!"

"All security systems are down sir."

"Excellent, set a course to the UEG colony of Harvest, I shall contact General Grievous."

"As you can see, we have reasons to believe this attack was orchestrated by the Confederacy to frame the Republic." The Director replied confidently.

"But what if this is simply a ploy to frame the Confederacy instead?" the President Gandler asked, rubbing his chin. "If I'm going to declare war on somebody, I want to make sure it's the right person."

"That was our concern as well Mr. President, the black box also

stored all video recordings up until the cameras were powered down. Thermal Imaging captured this image of one of the terrorists." The director clicked a button on his pad and the image appeared on screen. The clothing was a light yellow, a humanoid silhouette surrounding a red silhouette. The terrorist's flesh was thin, with definite disc joints and a triangular head. Two deep red dots on the face marked eyes, as did other patches on the body signify areas of great heat ventilation. "This image matches those of a Separatist battle droid, and the areas producing excessive heat correspond to the vents on the ones Lord Tyrannus used as body guards."

Fernson and the audience nodded their heads in realization. "You are certain that it was the CIS that attacked us?" President Gandler asked.

"Mr. President, my people do not deal in certainty, but we have reasonable suspicion." The Director replied. "Significant evidence points that this attack was an attempt by the Confederacy to frame the Republic so as to prompt us to go to war with them."

"How do we know this is not some rogue element in either side?" General Alexander Burnstone asked, scanning his pad with a doubtful eye.

"We don't, but the fact that CIS battle droids were used on a Confederate planet that made no moves to apprehend the terrorists that were left behind shows that some strings were pulled from the top. Look, I'm sure we can create a dozen different theories around this attack, but the evidence we have most strongly points to the Confederacy as the mastermind. I recommend that we remove our embassies from their worlds before another attack occurs. ONI is already monitoring other planets in the Confederacy where UEG lives are at risk. We know prisoners were taken at the docks, but we can't locate them. Coreillan authorities claim to have them in custody but are denying us the ability to interrogate them. That alone is setting off warning bells."

"Then it's settled I suppose, the UEG shall declare war on the Confederacy." Fernson said with finality.

"Hold on Admiral. Director, is it possible for us to send in a strike team to 'liberate' some of the prisoners?" President Gandler asked. A slight grin appeared on the Director's face.

"It is possible; I believe we have a Special Warfare Group stationed on a frigate close by."

"How special?" Burnstone asked, skeptical. The Director's grin broadened slightly, the most emotion the man had ever shown to those in the room.

"Spartans."

****UEG Embassy****

****Coreilla ****

****Andromeda Galaxy****

****23:00 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Captain Donald-223 shifted in his seat. The diminutive fold out chair was not meant for the seven foot super soldier that occupied it. At the end of the Human-Covenant War, as the UNSC returned control over to the UEG, the details of the Spartan Program surfaced. Its citizens appalled, the UEG demanded the perpetrators be brought to justice. Heads began to roll and the Director and most of the upper levels were jailed for war crimes. As ONI restructured itself, the Spartans were given the choice to remain in the service or be honorably discharged. Most stayed, and the Spartan Corps became a branch under the Special Forces Command. As the years of peace continued, the remaining Spartans were discharged as the UNSC demobilized its vast army. Ten years ago, ONI asked the UEG Congress and the Military Heads of the UNSC for permission to reactivate the Spartan Program as an all volunteer force. After assurance that enrollment age would be that of the standard inductee to any UNSC branch, both powers gave their blessing. Applicants who fit the genetic, aptitude, and age restrictions were inducted at the age of 18. Taken straight to the rebuilt camp of the first Spartan training group on Reach, they began the four year training process that formed them into the legendary, lethal super soldiers. Now trained to operate in four man squads, each team was comprised of equally capable soldiers who were given specialized training in field medicine, sniping, leadership, and demolitions. Donald, as always, was the first in the briefing room. The next person to enter was Brian-203, their medic. His armor was the same digital grey as the rest of the squad, except he had a red cross on his helmet's forehead. The armor was the MJOLNIR Mark VII, similar in appearance to the older V and VI, but with a more powerful and compact reactor and stronger shields. Additional equipment could be bolted into the small of their back like cloaking devices, transmitters, and bubble shield generators. The last two Spartans, Laura-225 and Jack-216, entered right behind Brian. The rest of the squad wasn't late; Brian just preferred to be early so as to make sure the rest of the squad DID show up on time.

"Always the early riser huh Captain?" Brian quipped through the squad's private channel.

"Just making sure you remembered to brush your teeth Doc."

"My oral health is impeccable, the ladies love me." Brian shot back, a smug grin behind his polarized visor.

"I don't love you," Laura joked as the squad settled into their seats in the front row.

"That's because you're not a woman Laura," Brian replied. "What about you Chaplin, want some of my advice?"

Jack shook his head and text appeared on all their HUDs. "_**If I'm looking for another man I'll let you know.**_" The squad burst out laughing and Brian punched the mute's shoulder. Jack had suffered brain trauma when he had slammed into the ground during parachute training. He lost the ability to speak and the Navy techs couldn't rebuild that part of the brain. Brain cloning was advanced but certain parts just couldn't be reproduced perfectly. His speech would have been slurred and he would have struggled to form simple sentences. Jack decided that a life of eternal silence where he could use the advanced translators that turned thought into speech so he could convey complex sentences was better than speaking like a four

year old. He also hated parachute drops.

"Okay, that was pretty good," Brian admitted. Donald grinned at his squad's antics, he knew they were excited. This would be their first real operation and they were itching to live up to the Spartan name. The door opened and a man in suit and glasses walked in, ONI pin on his jacket.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting Spartans, let us begin." The man powered on the holographic projector at the front of the room. A building appeared with armored shutters over the windows then zoomed out to reveal it was part of a large octagon shaped compound with turrets dotting its massive walls. "This is your target, the Coreillan Planetary Defense Headquarters, the main Confederacy base. You are to infiltrate this base and locate the prisoners taken during the terrorist attack on the Carnival." The image zoomed back into the building, going down to the basement level. "This is the brig, located four stories below the ground floor. In these cells are the captured terrorists. You are to liberate these prisoners so they can be interrogated." Donald raised his hand.

"What species are we dealing with?" It was an honest question. The sheer amount of alien life within the Andromeda Galaxy was staggering, and the UNSC was hard pressed to document on how best to kill each race.

"We have reason to believe that the prisoners are battle droids. The units are being kept for show encase we come looking. Not that they let us."

"Seems unusual, why keep them around when they can just wipe them clean?" Laura pointed out.

"Indeed, that s why you are to also gather all communications data and operational files. For that, we are giving you the Smart A.I. Paperclip." The aforementioned A.I. suddenly appeared in the hologram, a dark green paperclip that looked at them through the walls of the structure.

"Greetings, I am Paperclip, with whom would you like me to accompany?" The A.I.'s body flashed as he spoke, lighting up with each syllable. Paperclip's voice was monotonic, conveying no emotion. Jack raised his hand and text appeared on the hologram.

"_**With me.**_"

"Very well, transferring to memory card." The A.I. disappeared and a small chip extended from the port. The ONI agent grabbed it and held it up.

"You will insert Paperclip into their system, where he will copy and store all their data for analysis. You Spartans will be inserted by Warthog as the ambassador visits the commander in charge of the base to ask what steps have been taken to improve security at the dock. You will enter the base cloaked and sneak inside. If confronted, nonlethal techniques are to be used against organic personnel. Droids can be destroyed. You will have one hour at the most to complete your mission. Signal the ambassador when you are ready to leave. Inversely, he will signal you if he is cut short. Get it done Spartans, dismissed."

9. Chapter 9

****Coreillan Planetary Defense Headquarters****

****Coreilla****

****21:21 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Jack shifted in his seat, adjusting the silenced M7 that he held tight against his chest. He and his fellow Spartans were crammed inside the back of a civilianized Warthog, the carbon fiber shell a front for the layer of shielding that blocked sensors.

"Remind me why I didn't pick shotgun?" Brian asked as he tried to get his long legs into a comfortable position.

"It's too cramped in here for me to listen to you run your mouth Brian. Maintain operational silence." Donald ordered as he shifted his head to one side to reduce the strain on his neck. The Warthog suddenly lurched to a stop.

"_We've arrived Pathfinder, stand by for go._" The Warthog driver's voice crackled over the squad's channel, sounding tinny. The minutes ticked by as the super soldiers heard the muffled conversation between the ambassador and the commanding officer.

"I'm sorry its such short notice Lord General, but our leaders are breathing down my neck to get this resolved." Ambassador Crawford's voice filtered through the shell.

"It's no problem, anything to assist our trade partners with that dastardly attack." The Lord General replied. "Shall we?"

"Yes, please." The two continued talking, exchanging formalities as their voices faded away, as they walked into the building.

"_Camo on Spartans, you're green to go. Commence operation._"

"About damn time," Brian muttered as he and his weapons suddenly disappeared, replaced by a slight wavering in the air. The rest of the Spartans followed suit, disappearing from view. Jack unbolted the bottom panel of the Warthog. He slowly lifted it and rested it against the side wall. The paved ground greeted them as Jack slowly slid himself out and beneath the vehicle. Brian, Laura, and Donald followed, and the four super soldiers crawled under the 'Hog. Donald replaced the panel and blinked his confirmation light. Three other lights flashed in response on his HUD. "Move out." The squad slowly crawled out from beneath the vehicle and stood. The main entrance was directly in front of them. The ambassador's motorcade was lined up to their left and right. Multiple airspeeders were parked along the curb in front of the main entrance. "Follow along the speeders; we'll go along the side entrance." Three green lights blinked. The Spartans slowly snuck along the craft, keeping behind them as much as possible. They rounded the corner and were met with two battle droids guarding the entrance. "Let's find a way past them." Donald ordered.

"_**Wait sir, I have an idea.**_" Jack's text appeared on the screen.

Donald watch as a decorative rock from the planter suddenly floated in the air and was then catapulted into a delivery speeder that was parked down the side alley. It struck with a resounding bang and the two skinny droid turned.

"What was that?" one asked, turning to its companion.

"We'd better check it out." The other responded and the pair began to walk away in sync, their feet clunking against the paved row.

"Great job, let's move." Donald praised. Jack pulled Paperclip's chip from the slot in his helmet and held it against the doors panel. The light on it changed from red to green and it slid open. The four entered swiftly and the door locked behind them. "Alright, to the command center, let's go!"

****Chancellor's Office****

****Senate District****

****Courscant****

****16:30 Courscant Time****

Chancellor Palpatine eased back in his seat and brought his hands together to form a pyramid before resting them against his lower lip.

"So your attempts at trying to persuade the United Earth Government have failed Senator?" he asked politely, his voice calm and reassuring.

"Yes Chancellor, they are steadfast in remaining neutral. They have kept their word and have constructed embassies on Naboo and here on Courscant. Their merchant ships have begun delivering their goods and Naboo has had an influx in vacationers. The queen is most pleased." Padme Amidala replied.

"But?" Palpatine prodded with a slight smile on his face, amused by the Senator's admittance of failure. Amidala was one of his strongest opponents in any act of war proposed to the Senate, and watching his rival admit defeat was enjoyable. He quickly put back on his gentle mask, the look of caring concern and fatherly tenderness that his political presence was known for. His true side, as a Sith Lord, was far different.

"But, they will not provide any military aid, nor will they do the same for the CIS." Padme finished, a little downcast.

"Have you heard of the tragedy that happened on Coreilla?" Palpatine asked, showing the appropriate amount of sorrow.

Padme's face darkened. "Yes, everyone has, it is all over the Holonet. The UNSC is investigating it, why do you ask?"

"I ask because it may have been the Separatists that attacked that vessel and killed those people." Palpatine explained, though he knew the real culprits. He had orchestrated the attack himself.

"What proof do you have?" Amidala asked, suspicion leaking into her

voice. "Are you suggesting I blame the Confederacy at my next meeting with Ambassador Sampson?"

"No, no, no. At least, not until we have proof. But until then, just keep trying to push him in the right direction."

"Do we really need them on our side, surely their neutrality is enough?" Amidala asked.

"We need allies Senator, our armies are spread thin. If this war goes on any longer we won't have enough men to fight with. If we can get the UEG on our side then we can end this war quickly. I hope you understand just how dire of a situation we are in. We CAN win this war, we just need help."

"I'll do my best Chancellor, good day." Amidala stood and left, shoulders sagging a little. Palpatine let a grin show on his face as he watched her leave. All was going according to plan, all that was left to do now was wait and plan for the glorious future that awaited.

****Command Center****

****Coreillan Planetary Defense Headquarters****

****Coreilla****

****21:54 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Jack lowered himself down slowly from the vent and landed without a sound, a tough feat in the half ton armor he was wearing. The command staff, which consisted of droids and one Coreillan overseer, was unaware of his presence. "_There is an appropriate slot on that terminal to your left."_ Paperclip pointed out, his monotone voice flowing out of the speakers in Jack's helmet. An arrow appeared on Jack's HUD, pointing to an unused terminal.

**Got it.** Jack slowly crept to the empty terminal, removed Paperclip's card and inserted it into the machine. It whirred to life, yet the rest of the staff was so focused they didn't notice.

"_Jack, status?"_ Donald asked. The squad had split up, Brian, Laura, and Donald heading to the cells while Jack inserted Paperclip into the mainframe.

"_**Paperclip is in, he's working now.**_"

"_Good, we're almost at the cell block, keep me posted. Donald out."_

"_**Understood.**_" Jack watched the staff go about their business nervously as Paperclip infiltrated the network.

"_Files located, copying now." Paperclip reported a status bar appearing on Jack's HUD. It began to fill rapidly. "Hrm, this is interesting, there is additional orders regarding the cleanup of the dock. Accessing now." _The status bar filled Jack sighed with relief.

"_**Let's get outta here Paper-." **_Jack's thoughts were cut off as an alarm suddenly blared.

"Something just tried to open a secure file, it came from Terminal 22!" A droid reported. Two of their Super Battle Droids who had been guarding the door surged towards the terminal.

"_**Paperclip, what did you do?!""**_

_Unknown, I did not trigger any __**alarms**__. Wait, that's not right, these aren't Separatist coding files. They appear to be-."_ Paperclip was silenced as the Jack yanked the A.I. from the terminal.

"_**No time, we gotta move." **_Jack ducked under the droid and ran for the exit. He slammed into the overseer who went flying. The SBDs turned as Jack shimmered briefly as the camouflage cells reacted to the impact and tried to blend with the Coreillan. A partial image of the Coreillan appeared in midair and the two guards immediately opened fire.

"He's cloaked, blast him!" The overseer coughed as he picked himself up. Jack's active camouflage failed as lasers impacted his shields. Jack spun and hosed the lead SBD with his silenced SMG. Bullets pocketed the armor and the droid staggered back. Jack ran to the door as his radio crackled.

"_Jack, what the hell is going on?! Guards are running all over the place!"_

**Paperclip tripped an alarm; I'm engaging enemy battle droids."**

"_Damn it, we're coming to you, tell the ambassador we have to abort now!"_

"_**Affirmative."**_ The radio clicked off as Jack charged down the hallway at top speed, knocking droids and staff aside. He activated the emergency link with the ambassador's pad. _**Emergency meeting at embassy, get to your motorcade now for transport.**_ As Jack sided around a corner he was greeted with three shielded Droidekas blocking his path. He spun around and the droids opened fire.

10. Chapter 10

Hallway

Coreillan Planetary Defense Headquarters

Coreilla

Donald, Brian, and Laura were running for their lives. They ducked around another corner and hosed the previous section of hallway with bullets, peppering droids and sending four tumbling to the ground. The three super soldiers then sprinted to the conference room where the ambassador was. Donald clicked on the squad's frequency. "Jack, Laura, get to the motorcade and hold them off. Brian, with me, we're getting the ambassador, there's no way in hell he's getting out of their on his own." Three green lights flashed in his HUD and Laura

broke off from the group, heading towards the front door. Donald and Brian slid around a corner and were met with a hail of laser fire. Both men leapt back as Jack darted past them, the rolling destroyer droids folding into ball mode and rolling after him. Donald and Brian each grabbed one of the disk shaped bots, Donald prying his open with his enhanced strength. Metal shrieked and servos fried as he shoved his SMG into the gap he made and emptied his magazine into the now unprotected battery pack. The droid folded up on its self and clattered to the deck. Donald turned and saw Brian slamming his droid repeatedly into floor, denting the metal with resounding clangs. Donald grabbed the other side and the two physically wrenched the droid in half.

"Looks like he's not half the 'bot he used to be!" Brian quipped as the pair resumed their sprint.

"That was bad, even for you."

"Look, life or death situations don't give you the best material; I take what I can get."

"Mouth shut weapon up." Brian nodded and the pair stacked up on the door. Donald held up three fingers, counted down, pumped his arm up and down, and delivered a vicious kick. The door buckled and collapsed inward and the two Spartans charged through the door. Five Super Battle Droids greeted them, gun arms extended.

"Where the hell are they?!" Brian asked as he brought an armored fist

****Command and Control Bunker****

****Coreillan Planetary Defense Headquarters****

Nambur eased back in his chair, a Coreillan Ale in his hands. It was his third, and he brought the glass to his lips, he was aware that the lips were not his own.

"Excellent work Nambur, you shall be paid handsomely, your records are now cleaned." The cloaked man in front of him said as he dropped a sack of credits in Nambur's head. The figure of the UNSC Ambassador, Durgen was his name, grinned as he tossed the sack lightly in his hand.

"It was a pleasure, well, I'd best be on my way." The Clawdite stood and gave a mock salute.

"Yes, but there is a slight problem. You see, you are free to go Nambur, but the dear ambassador is not."

"What are you saying?" Nambur asked, an edge in his voice. The man merely shrugged.

"You see, for the illusion to be complete the ambassador has to be have been either rescued or killed. Soâ€¦"

"You want me to go be saved by the UEG savages?" Nambur asked, frowning.

"We'll double your pay." The man said simply, leaning back in his

chair.

"Done, I'll contact you when I'm clear."

"We'll be waiting." Nambur nodded, pocketed the sack, drained his ale, and headed for the door. The man looked behind him at a shadowed doorway. "You know what to do." Cad Bane nodded, tipped his hat, and went to his position.

****Motorcade****

****Coreillan Planetary Defense Headquarters****

"Get down!" a driver yelled and a flurry laser blasts impacted the side of the Warthog. Laura peeked around the burned bumper as the vehicle rocked on its shocks. Another fusillade of red streaks forced her back, her shields flaring. Two marines opened fire from behind the limousine, shell casing flying from their SAWs. Droids toppled and shattered as the bullets punched through their thin armor with ease.

"David, where the fuck are you, we're gonna be overrun!" Laura asked as she put a bullet through a Coreillan commander with the DMR she grabbed from the Warthog. Her M7 wasn't getting the job done.

"_We found the Ambassador; we're coming out the back, cover us!_"

"_This Charlie-23, we're inbound, get set to pull out."_

"_Copy 23, better make it fast! Laura, Jack, hose them now!_" Laura and Jack sprung out from behind the Warthog, peppering the droid's positions with bullets. The marines followed suit, droids fell left and right while their organic officers dove for cover. Brian and David sprinted to the limo, the Ambassador slung across Brian's shoulder. David and Brian leapt over the armored limo and propped the Ambassador against the armored door. "_What's the situation?_"

"We got multiple tangos attacking from the main entrance with additional units attacking from the sides!" Laura reported as she slammed a fresh magazine into her rifle and racked the bolt.

"_Charlie-23 to Headhunter, we are detecting multiple AA emplacements around the base, we are unable to land there, get the Ambassador and your men out via ground transport, we will pick you up in a lot 10 blocks north of the main gate."_

"_Understood Charlie-23. Marines, get in the limo ready to roll, Spartans, get offensive, we gotta cover the exit."_ The marines nodded and slid through the passenger door, one sitting in the driver's seat. He thumbed the ignition and the armored vehicle roared to life. David flung open the rear door, shoved the Ambassador in, slammed the door, and thumped heavily on the trunk. "_Move it!_" The limo rocketed forward, charging towards the main gate. "_Engage!_" David and Brian charged forward, firing full automatic. Jack and Laura followed, vaulting the Warthog and charging up the stairs. Lasers pinged off her shields as she put her armored fist through the chest of one droid and flung it into a Coreillan officer. The sound of snapping bones sounded and the man flew back into a crumpled heap.

Jack grabbed the arm of a Super Battle Droid and wrenched it to the left. The arm came free and Jack then pounded the stunned droid with its detached appendage. Its casing dented and the droid flailed its remaining arm until Laura put two rounds into it's small head. David yanked his combat knife from its sheath on his shoulder and rammed it through an organic officer's skull. His forehead caved in and grey matter seeped from the wound. The Spartans were now in the droid's midst and Jack grabbed one of the BIs by the neck and removed its head, using the headless body as a shield while he put four rounds into four more robotic skulls with his sidearm. Laura turned and saw the limo racing towards the gate. Suddenly, a rocket flew from a small shed and slammed into the vehicle. It tumbled onto its side and slid into the wall. A second rocket flew and the limousine disappeared in fireball, bits of flaming metal souring in all directions.

"FUCKING HELL!" Brian cursed as he ducked behind the armored front door of the headquarters to let his shields recharge, readying a rifle he had pried from a battle droid's metal fingers.

"Squad, fall back to the Warthog!" David ordered the stunned Spartans as he clicked on his radio. "_Charlie-23, the Ambassador is down, a rocket destroyed the limo, stand by!"_

"_We copy Headhunter."_ David clicked off his mike and the Spartans raced to the burning limousine.

"Jack, Laura, take out the fucker in the shack!" Laura nodded and the two blinked their lights before charging through the doorway of the small structure. Their helmet lights found nothing.

"_**Empty sir.**"_ Jack reported, running to the flaming vehicle. The four stared as the flames and smoke reached skyward.

"No way could anyone have survived that." Laura analyzed, looking forlornly at the funeral pyre that was once a protective shell. A red laser bolt caught everyone's attention and they all dived to the ground. Laura raised her rifle and put a bullet through the bolt's originator's chest. The droid toppled to the ground but more were charging behind it, rifles blazing. Red bolts pinged off her shields and the armor's alarm sounded.

"Fall back through the gate, get to Charlie-23!" David ordered backpedaling and firing at the same time. The other three followed suit before turning and sprinting out the gate. "_Charlie-23, the ambassador is KIA, we're coming to you, standby for rapid exfil!"_

"_Say again Headhunter?"_

"_The Ambassador is dead; we're coming to you with droids up our ass, get set to bug out!"_

"_Understood Headhunter, shit!" _

"_Not your fault 23, we're halfway there."_

"_Copy that, fucking Seps."_

UNSC High Command

****Reach****

****Milky Way Galaxy****

****Four Days Later****

"_I repeat, they have laid siege to the embassy, we need re-enforcements immediately. We're running low on food and ammunition and have multiple civilian personnel that need extraction!" _ High Admiral Schreiber flicked a switch and the message stopped. He turned to the assembled admirals and clasped his hands behind his back.

"That was the last message out of our Coreillan Embassy before the Confederacy jammed all our communications. Word has just come down from Switzerland; the Confederacy has declared war on us due to the failure of Operation Virus. They have begun to lay siege to our embassies but we were able to remove all staff before they were completely encircled with what little ships we have in the Andromeda Galaxy. All except for Coreilla. Our first military operation against the Confederacy is to punch a hole through the Confederate blockade, rescue all embassy personnel, and bring them back to UEG space. I assembled you all here because I want all of your fleets ready to mobilize. Fifth Fleet will be relieved of its home guard duties and will join the Seventh, First, and Third Fleets in the establishment of a Forward Operating Base on Coursant. Admiral Fernson, I want you form a taskforce to punch through that blockade. Use whatever forces you see fit and send the rest to Naboo. The Queen has most graciously offered her orbit as a staging area for any assaults in the region. We are getting in contact with the Grand Army of the Republic to see where we best fit in their conflict and where we will be establishing bases. The Twelfth Fleet, which is being pulled out of mothball, will join the Second in the defense of the UEG border. Files have been sent to you with all the information we have on CIS naval strengths and last known fleet positions, as well as a glossary of all known naval vessels and their specifications. Give these out to your captains for reference. Finally, as of now the Cole Protocol has been reinstated, you all know what to do. Questions?" Fernson raised a hand.

"What resources do I have?"

"Fifth Fleet, whatever you need, like I said. This first fight has GOT to be a win or else the mood back home will turn sour really fast. ONI has a Prowler in orbit and will keep you updated.

"Understood sir. Consider it done." He saluted and his hologram flashed off.

"The rest of you, as of now we have very little for you to do. Just focus on readying your fleets for action, as soon as we have a response from the Republic we will tell you where to go. Dismissed gentlemen."

11. Chapter 11

****Destroyer **_**Patton **_**(DD-76)****

****Slipspace Enroute to Coreilla****

Operation Boomerang ****

****5:34 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Captain Wheeler shifted in his chair, his excitement and dread making him uneasy. As of two days ago he was given word to join a portion of 3rd Fleet at the Space Station Geneva for an immediate operation briefing. There, he and his fellow captains were told they were take part in the evacuation of the besieged embassy on Coreilla. Code named Operation Boomerang, the plan was for a squadron of battleships, cruisers, and destroyers to punch a hole in the Separatist defense in orbit, thus allowing the frigate Johnson to swoop in, deploy drop ships and a Pod heavy lifter to the embassy, grab all personnel, and jump out of system. That was the plan anyway, and Wheeler didn't put much faith in it. The plan put double the number of sailors and marines at risk than those stranded at the embassy, and while Wheeler wasn't one to leave comrades behind, a special force op would have been better. But he had his orders, and he would follow them to the letter.

"Ten minutes until we exit Slipspace Captain." Patton announced, materializing on his podium.

"Thank you Patton." Wheeler replied. Patton nodded a slight grin on his face. "What?"

"Finally got a full fledged fight on our hands sir. We'll give those Separatists a kind of hell they've never seen before!"

"While I am glad to see you are excited at the prospect of defeating our enemies Patton, I ask that you keep yourself subdued. The crew is nervous enough already, and your bravado may inspire more trepidation than confidence." Wheeler gave the A.I. a pointed glare to emphasize his point. He usually tolerated Patton's behavior, but he wasn't in the mood for the A.I. to follow his namesake's example.

"Of course sir, my apologies, I will inform you of any issues and will notify you when we are about to enter normal space." Patton saluted and the podium deactivated. Wheeler sighed and glanced at the hologram that projected from the arm of his chair. It showed the wedged shape formation the ships had formed before making the jump. With the improved Slipspace drives and calculation programs given to them by the Sangheli, UNSC ships could jump in formation just like the Covenant lorded over them during the war. The battleships Ironclad, Lord Hood, and Russia made up the tip of the spear, followed by six destroyers; Patton, Valiant, Rommel, Samuel B. Roberts, Napoleon, and Stalingrad. The two ships that made up the tips of the wedge were the four heavy cruisers Sucker Punch, Ill Intentions, Sphinx, and Shakespeare. Inside the wedge was the Johnson, escorted by the corvettes Garand and Colt.

"For the record sir, I found Patton rather inspiring." Hafflax announced his eyes focused on his station.

"Don't encourage him." Pruitt grumbled as he triple checked his keyboard.

"I think he's cute." Weapons Officer Trisha Bradshaw remarked, stunning the rest of the bridge crew.

"Really? Oh he'd give you an ear full if he heard that." Hafflax explained. "He has this whole manly image of himself."

"I did hear that and will refrain from comment Lieutenant Hafflax. Exiting SlipSpace now, reengaging combat link with Admiral Fernson." Patton suddenly materialized again, calm as ever.

"All right boys, you know the plan. Destroy as many ships as you can. If it's in our way, kill it. Godspeed." Fernson cut the link and the squadron wide battle net activated. Patton and the rest of the battle group burst through the hole in space they created.

"Unlock all Archer pods, remove safeties on two of our nukes, and get the MAC ready to fire, we're going to be coming out fighting." Wheeler ordered. The clacking of keys sounded as Fernson's voice again rang through the speakers, this time on the battle net.

"All ships, cleared to engage, give 'em hell!"

****Dominator-Class Heavy Frigate **_**Wrath**_**

****High Orbit****

****Coreilla****

****5:55 Standard UNSC Military Time****

Admiral Massin Nuldo yawned as he sipped from his cup of Caff. The siege of the Solan (The name the CIS had given the humans from the Milky Way.) embassy was progressing slowly. Against previous expectations, the embassy had held for over five planetary cycles. This was do impart to the Lord General's desire to suffer as little casualties as possible as well as the astounding lethality of the Solan's weapons. Despite being woefully inferior to the far more technologically advanced blasters, the slug throwers the Solans used were causing a great number of casualties and the effect they had on organic personnel was too terrible to even think about. Massin shook his head, attempting to combat the drowsiness that clouded his mind. The defensive fleet of cruisers, destroyers, and frigates that had been positioned around the planet had been on constant alert. Anybody trying to prevent a planetary assault would have scoffed at both the small size of the force and the tonnage of the vessels that made up the battle line. But this was deemed sufficient. After all, the Solans were mere savages, and the capital ships were needed on the front lines. Massin was more than a little indignant at being assigned home guard duties. Unlike his more cowardly peers, he was determined to prove his greatness in combat, and it sure as stang wasn't here.

"Admiral, we are detecting large spikes in energy 1,000 kilometers off the port bow." The battle droid manning the scanner array reported.

"What, do you know what is causing it?" Massin asked, curiosity blooming.

"Negative." Massin frowned in displeasure, concern rising in his

gut.

"Sir, multiple anomalies detected 1,000 kilometers of the port bow. They can be seen through the view screen." The navigation droid reported, pointing its clawed hand in emphasis.

"I know which way is port you- by the stars what is _that?!"_ Massin looked at the anomalies in terror. They were swirling holes that seemed to be a tear in the very fabric of space. Just when he thought they couldn't get any more frightening, 16 Solan warships surged out of them in a wedge formation. The three leading the group were monstrous; easily double the size of his ship. The others that followed looked to be of similar class and below, but it was the behemoths that concerned him.

"Sir, enemy ships are firing!" the scanner droid announced. Large bursts came from the prow of the ships and lances of light raced towards Massin's fleet.

"All shield power forward!" The rounds of whatever weapon the Solans had just unleashed impacted multiple vessels. Each of the 13 vessels that had made up the wedge had fired on a separate vessel with differing results. The largest, which Massin assumed were battleships, caused the most damage. On shit was a clean miss, but the other two had struck home. The frigate _Subjugation_ was shoved backwards, the round from the Solan ship gutting it from bow to stern. The other, the cruiser _Penance_ was struck at an angle and was torn in half, bodies of droids and Nemodians being sucked into the void of space. The rounds fired by the other ships were presumably less powerful, at the end of the barrage six of Massin's ships were destroyed, two disabled, three damaged, and the rest left without shields. Massin couldn't hide his shock as a more than a third of his fleet was knocked out from the fight. He hadn't even had a chance to fire back. His frowned, his face set in barely uncontrolled rage. "Open fire, order the ships guarding the opposite side of the planet to regroup with us at flank speed. What the stang did they hit us with?"

"They appear to be rail guns sir." The weapons droid reported.

"Impossible, slug throwers couldn't do that much damage. Divide the fleet and close in. We're going to swarm them and get so close they can't use their main guns! All turbo laser batteries to focus on their lead ship. Burn them to ash!"

****Destroyer **_**Patton**_** (DD-76)****

****Coreillan Space****

Operation Boomerang****

Wheeler was nearly thrown out of his chair when the first barrage of enemy lasers struck his ship. "Report!"

"Impact centered on sections F-I. Armor at 62% at impact sight, surrounding area at 73%." Patton reported, his pistols drawn and firmly grasped in his hands.

"Some of those rounds didn't scratch the larger vessels; they must

have shields like the raiders we encountered."

"Sir, enemy fleet is advancing!" Pruitt announced his eyes locked on his screen.

"Get me an Archer lock on the nearest ship. As soon as the MAC gun is recharged fire-." Wheeler was cut off as the ship shuddered, the MAC gun blasting a large hole in the side bow advancing enemy cruiser. The ship veered right and upward, catching another round meant for the ship to its right and split into three large pieces. Its neighbor dove under the wreckage and kept advancing. "-on that other ship!"

"Yes sir!" Trisha confirmed. "Lock achieved."

"Fire pods A through H!" The rockets flew from their tubes and raced towards the previously shielded ship. Point defense lasers streamed from the vessel, destroying a quarter of the missiles. The rest impacted with balls of short lived fire. Flames engulfed the forward half of the ship but it still pressed on.

"Sir, enemy missiles incoming!" Orange balls of fire raced towards the UNSC fleet. Tracers from the point defense gun lit up the space and more than half were destroyed. The rest impacted the Russia. The battle ship lurched at the impacts and veered hard right. It slammed into the destroyer Rommel. The smaller ship crumpled under the force of the much larger ship and detonated. Russia was forced upward by the blast, a gaping hole that vented atmosphere and bodies.

"Son of a bitch!" Wheeler cursed and finished off the flaming cruiser with another MAC round.

"Close up that gap and keep pushing. Patton, Roberts, put two nukes through the enemies formation left and right of the center. We'll fire off our remaining Archers as a distraction. The rest of you pound the living hell out of the enemy center!" Fernson ordered before the Lord Hood unleashed a cloud of missiles. The mass of Archers swarmed towards the enemy fleet. They impacted dozens of vessels, glancing off shields or burrowing into hulls. The cruisers and destroyers fired their MACs at the center of the formation. Enemy ships exploded, burst apart, or were brought to a halt as the rounds tore through armor and shields. Paton and Samuel B. Roberts disgorged their nuclear missiles in a mass of their own missiles, following the torrent Lord Hood unleashed. Multiple Archers and one of the Excalibur nukes were destroyed but the rest hit home. The nukes detonated in the enemies midst and multiple enemy ships just ceased to exist. The remaining ships retaliated and an intense barrage of lasers engulfed the Valiant. Its armor grew red and it began to disintegrate.

"This is the Valiant, heavy damage sustained, reactor nearing critical. Distancing now." The Valiant lifted clear of the UNSC formation before it exploded, reactor critical. The energy wave slammed into the Patton and the bridge lights flickered.

"Multiple hull breaches, sealing now." Engineering officer Susan Cohagen reported, typing frantically. The rest of the UNSC ships surged on, enemy vessels now in range of the deck guns. Ironclad and Stalingrad engaged in a close up gun duel with four enemy

destroyers as the two vessels passed each other.

"Cruisers, tighten up, the enemy is attempting to surround us." Fernson ordered. The cruisers slowed and drifted back, changing the formations shape from a wedge into a kite.

We've destroyed so many, and they just keep coming. Wheeler thought. Half of the enemy ships had been destroyed and a majority of the remaining vessels were heavily damaged. That didn't mean they were any less dangerous. Suddenly, two heavily damaged destroyers surged out of the two packs of ships that had formed on either side of the kite formation and slammed into the cruiser _Sucker Punch_. The ships became intertwined and forced the stricken cruiser into the _Sphinx_. _Sucker Punch_ fired frantically at the two destroyers while the _Sphinx_ struggled to get away. The four ships fell behind the UNSC formation when the destroyers overloaded their reactors. All four ships ceased to exist.

"Mother fuckers!" Pruitt yelled, staring at the swirling bits of metal that had once been their comrades.

_This is bad, real bad. We're taking too many casualties.

—

"Goddamnit, keep moving!" Fernson ordered. Finally the formation entered the atmosphere. The tip of the wedge split and the _Johnson_ surged out, its corvette escorts right behind it. The formation reversed itself into a semi-circle, and pounded the two packs of CIS warships. The enemy in turn began to charge the UNSC line that had formed. "Hold them back, we gotta keep the _Johnson_ clear!" Fernson ordered and Wheeler began to wonder if the embassy staff was really worth the blood spilled.

**A/N: **_I know, I know, I failed in my promise of not leaving my readers hanging for months and months. School has kept me crazy busy but now that finals are done and summer break has started and I can FINALLY get back to this story. Expect another chapter fairly soon and thank you to those who patiently waited and have not given up on me. Please leave a review on what you think of the story be it positive, negative, encouraging, correcting, or insulting. While all may not be appreciated, they are most certainly welcomed so I know what I'm doing right or wrong in terms of canon. I ask that you allow some leniency as there may be elements that are AU for the story's sake. Have a good one!-Arm Chair General_

12. Chapter 12

HEV Drop Pod

1300 Feet Above Coreillan Embassy

Operation **_Boomerang**_

Corporal Jack Freely gripped the control sticks to the HEV and prayed that the pod would withstand the impact with the ground. He was thrown forward when the chute deployed and the flames that had been building around the pod dissipated. "_Alright, when we hit the dirt, we are to form up in the courtyard. The colonel in charge will guide us from there, see ya on the ground troopers." _Captain Buck's voice

crackled through the speaker's in Jack's helmet. As the altitude dropped, red lasers began to rise in rapid succession.

"Enemy Triple A!" Dominguez alerted and Jack was thrown about as his pod took a glancing blow. The pod directly in front of him blew apart from a direct hit, body parts spinning wildly in the air. _And that makes 19_. Jack's pod finally hit with a bone jarring slam and the front canopy blew out. Jack snatched his MA57 Assault Rifle and leapt from the pod. Others began impacting around him as his fellow troopers charged out. One pod burrowed into a parked car, splitting the sedan in half and twisting it's front skyward.

"_Colonel Burnstone, Silver Actual, we have made landfall in the Eastern Parking Lot, inbound now!"_ Buck alerted as he and his men sprinted inside. Mortar rounds began to burst around them. A trooper screamed as he was thrown forward, left leg missing just above the knee. A medic scooped him up and carried him bridal style into the embassy's main lobby.

"_Change of plans Silver, this mortar strike has driven us inside, meet me in the kitchens. Sergeant, get those Marines under some cover on the double, this is just to soften us up, once it lets up they'll be coming in force!"_

"_Silver copies, see ya soon. On me, let's go!"_ Buck led the 18 able troopers through the lobby, passing wounded Marines and MPs. Medics scrambled from man to man while two grim faced civilians draped curtains, sheets, and other fabrics over the dead. Dust tumbled from the roof as Silver entered the kitchens. Jack and Dominguez looked up, concerned.

"Don't worry about that shit, the guys who built this place knew what they were doing." A graying man announced, entering the room and stepping over piles of pans and crates of ammunition. He looked to be in his fifties and he was dressed in the standard Marine BDU with a combat vest. He had a crush cap with the Colonel Star proudly stitched on the front. A SAW was strapped to his back. "I'm Collingwood, and if you're gonna get me and my boys out, then you've got some work to do. Don't bother saluting me either, just a waste of time at this point."

"What's the situation sir?" Buck asked as he brought his hand down from his temple self-consciously. Burnstone rolled out a portable mat screen on a stove and pressed the button. Aerial footage of the bombed out embassy appeared, small bursts of flame marking the mortar impact points.

"Whoever the bastard is who is leading this army of bots is very repetitive. Mortar strikes before every assault and if we kill enough of them he pulls back, waits a couple hours and tries again. Dumb fuck I know, but he has the numbers and we don't. While tactically inept he WAS smart enough to move in four pieces of mobile Ack Ack. They are divided into groups of two. One group is here, in a lot about 10 blocks from the main gate. The other is 10 blocks west of us on the roof of a two story parking structure." Each location was illuminated in a red square. "Very exact in their placements too, probably had a damn ruler or some shit. We never had the numbers after their first assault caught us off guard. Half of your men will punch through their lines and blow those bastards to kingdom come. The rest will help hold the line here. We lost our long range comms

and laser designators in the shelling so you're the only ones with the direct line to the Navy. Just blaze the target and the Frigate will do the rest. The Spartans who started this shit are going with you. Id've sent them by themselves but I honestly don't trust their ability. You take these out and we can get dropships in here and get the fuck out. Too sum it up Captain, if you don't take those triple As out, we'd be better off building an elevator off this rock."

"Understood, where are the Spartans sir?" Buck asked as Burnstone stepped back from the map so the captain could see it.

"On your left captain." Four Spartans jogged up, their matte grey Mark VII armor blending in to the equally drab kitchen. It was the lead one with a TAC-Pad on his wrist who had spoken. He was armed with a MA-7C and had Magnums attached to his left and right thigh plates. The three behind were diversely armed. The tallest was armed with a SAW and had an M319 Grenade Launcher clamped on his back. The next soldier, a woman, had a Sniper Rifle on her back and a DMR in her hands. The Spartan bringing up the rear had Battle Rifle in hand, pointing the muzzle skyward so as to rest it on his shoulder. He had a red cross on his helmet and a Shotgun was attached to his back. In the small of his back, just above the buttocks, was a large field medical pack. The Spartan caught Jack's eyes and casually saluted.

"Sierra-223 at your service sir, this is Headhunter." The four super-soldiers saluted. "I understand that I am under your command for the duration of this mission."

Buck looked over the four and nodded. "Good to have you Spartans, just try to keep up."

"Don't worry sir, I ran track in High School." Headhunter's medic quipped.

"Not that this idle chat isn't riveting Captains but we've got enemy to kill, here's the plan." Burnstone slid a stylis from his wrist plate and began to draw on the map. "First, we split the group into two teams..."

****Third Floor****

****Apartment Building ****

****Four Blocks From Objective Bravo.****

****Coreilla****

****Operation Boomerang****

"Get down!" An ODSST yelled as a rocket soared overhead. Jack-216 ducked behind an overturned table as the projectile sailed through a window, slammed into a building across the street, and detonated. Rubble flew in all directions as the ornate stone facade collapsed onto the street.

"Shit that was close, ok, frag out!" Lieutenant Xander, leader of Team Two, shouted as he flung the explosive into the small cluster of Super Battle Droids that had just exited the elevator. The grenade

clanged off the lead droid's armored chest, fell, and detonated at leg height. Shrapnel clattered around as the droid ceased to exist. One of its companions, the sole survivor, used it's right arm to drag itself forward as it continued to shoot with its left as the elevator plummeted behind him. An ODST hopped on its back and emptied his weapon into the heavily crumpled casing. Sparks and wiring flew from the droid as the bullets tore through the compromised armor.

"Ain't so tough without any fuckin legs are ya?!" He mocked as he crushed it's little head with his boot.

"Push on troopers, we gotta get this done quick! Spartan, take point, the rest of you, on me!" Xanders ordered. Jack lead the way through the destroyed hallway and up a flight of stairs that was next to the now shattered elevator. Two of the smaller battle droids appeared as he rounded the corner and he gunned them down before they could even raise the alarm. Booting down a door at the last story Jack was riddled with lasers. His shields depleting, Jack sprayed blindly down the hallway. "Flashbang out!" Xanders yelled as he threw the device over Jack's shoulder. Jack turned his head to as the building was briefly illuminated with a deep bang.

"Ahh! My eyes, my eyes!" One of the droids yelled, metal hands covering its photo receptors.

"You idiot, focus on the enemy, they going too-." The other droid's words were cut short as Jack put his armored fist through its chest. Xanders and another ODST mowed down the other.

"Hallway clear, balcony should be this way sir!" An ODST with a dragon painted on his helmet notified, pointing to a door at the end of the hall.

"Sweep and clear these rooms troopers. I don't want any of these bastards to shoot us in the back!"

"**Yes sir." **Jack replied as he and two ODSTs stacked up on one of three doors that were on the right side of the hallway. The other troopers copied Jack's movements and soon troopers were on positioned at all the doors.

"Let's hit 'em together. Three, two, one, breach!" Xanders, Jack, and every other trooper closest to the door kicked them in. Jack charged through and was met with an empty apartment living room and kitchen. He moved forward as the troopers behind him strafed left and right.

"**Living room clear, check the bedroom!**" Jack ordered, pointing towards the small door to his left. The two troopers nodded and one of them kicked the door down. Lasers blazed through and he was cut down.

"Son of a bitch!" the other trooper yelled as he emptied his Assault rifle into doorway. Jack yanked a grenade from his belt.

"**Grenade out!**" He chucked the explosive hard through the door. With a thundering clump it tore a hole through the flimsy duracrete wall, dust raining down from the ceiling above. Jack charged in after the blast. Four battle droids lay in smoking pieces in the demolished room. "**Room clear sir.**" The roar of gunfire ended amid a chorus

of "Clear!" The only sound was the slightly distant thumping of the mortars and bark of machine guns. "***We have a man down.***"

"_Copy that, we took some hits, lock down that hallway. Nathan, get to the balcony and call in that strike!"_ Xanders ordered. Jack flashed his confirmation light and led the way back to the hall while a corpsman dragged the dead trooper into a side room. Five troopers were dead and two were wounded, one severely.

"Garand _this is Silver 1-2, requesting fire mission on grid coordinates 125 degrees North by 335 degrees West. We will lase, fire for effect." _Nathan's voice crackled in Jack's helmet.

"_Silver, _Garand, _we see your dot, firing for effect."_ There was relative silence for 20 seconds fired by large, successive blasts that shook the building as a stream of the _Garand's_ 75mm point defense guns unleashed a stream of high explosive shells on the structure below. A video link suddenly popped up in the corner of Jack's visor showing the parking garage crumbling under the volley.

"Whoo hoo!"

"Hell yeah!"

"Take that ya tin canned bastards!" A chorus of yells and cheers filled the floor as the troopers watched the objective disappear in a cloud of dust and fire.

"Can that chatter troopers, we still gotta get back. Yank the combat files from the dead, secure the wounded for transport, and get ready to run like hell!" Xanders clicked on his helmet mike. "_Silver 1-2 to_ _Temple, objective destroyed, returning to embassy_."

"_Silver 1-2, Temple, negative. Hold your ground the birds will come to you. We're running outta time here before the Seppie fleet gets it shit together. Good luck boys, drinks on me when you get aboard!"_

"_Temple, Silver 1-2, roger that, hope your pay is good Colonel._" Xanders killed the link and switched to the squad wide channel. "_Get to the roof and wait for extraction troopers. Let's see how high a tab we can get the Colonel to run!_"_With a collective sigh of relief, the ODSs grabbed their fallen and wounded comrades and climbed the last flight of stairs to the roof. As smoke rose from the debris of the parking structure and lot, Pelicans began the task of retrieving both the ODSs and the soldiers that had been left behind. The battle was over, but the Humanity's war in the Andromeda had only just begun.

**A/N: **_I know, I know. "Where have you been?" "Did you give the story up?" "Is this another in a massive collection of abandoned works that litter this site?" Well it's not. I have been on vacation away from my computer for the past weeks and this chapter was plagued by fits of writer's block and frustration. I am terribly sorry to have made you all wait so long after I promised not to but life has gotten in the way. I had a ton of fun at the expense of leaving this story to grow cold and forgotten. I hoped you enjoyed this latest chapter and will stick with it till the end. I am unsure when I will next update with school rearing its ugly head on the distant but ever

nearer horizon but rest assured I WILL update. I'm not done yet and I hope you aren't either. Until next time. "Arm Chair General_

13. Chapter 13

****Grand Convocation Chamber****

****Senate Building****

****Courscant****

****Three Weeks After Operation Boomerang****

****13:07 Standard UNSC Military Time****

"The disasterous loss of life that occurred during your little rescue mission on Coreilla proves your military is an incompetent gaggle of savages!" Senator Lott Dod accused, a long green finger pointing at the UEG ambassador. "And now you dare ask US to allow your civilization to join this war! If you're ineptitude is all we have to base your request on, you will not shorten this war as you so boldly claim, but extend it indefinetly and throw away more lives!" This caused an uproar as other senators yelled their objections. Only the few closest to Dod yelled their agreement.

"Need I remind you senator that our navy has conducted the deepest penetration of Separatist Lines since your civil war has begun! The key to winning this war is allies, senator, and you appear to be fresh out of those. Why else would this same senate send a delegate to sway us into joining this war before my people were attacked? Your army is stretched thin, our army is merely waiting for targets, and if we can join together this war will come to a much swifter end!" Ambassador Sampson replied, raising his voice above the cries of the other senators.

"This is an outrage! What right have you to judge our ability to wage war? If anything we shoul-."

"That is quite enough Senator Dod! I do believe we have debated on this matter quite enough. I move that we recess for two hours and then reconvene to vote on whether we ally ourselves with the United Earth Government in this war. You may take the time to confer with the leaders you represent if necessary and get some fresh air." Chancellor Palpatine proposed in his usual calm and soothing voice.

"I second that motion Chancellor, I believe we all could use a moment to regain our composures and our tempers." Senator Riyo Chuchi agreed, sending a pointed look at Senator Dod. He bristled and Sampson held back a smile.

"Then it is decided, we shall meet again in two hours time, Senate adjurened!" Vice Chair Mas Amedda announced, thumping his Speaker's Staff on the floor of his podium. Sampson sighed in relief as he manevured his repulsorpod into its docking bay. Grabbing a bottled water from the small cooler he kept hidden under the console, Sampson walked out of the chamber. The two Marine Honor Guards easily kept pace, their dress uniforms and wood accented Battle Rifles immaculate. Taking a large swig he offered it to one of the marines,

First Lieutenant Shung.

"Thank you sir." Shung said as he gratefully took a swig and held it out to the other guard, Sergeant Greg Daublin. Daublin shook his head and Shung handed the bottle back to Sampson. "That was quite the meeting, seemed to go on forever." Sampson nodded as he checked the small tablet on his wrist.

"Yeah, they don't seem to be very keen on having us in the war all of a sudden."

"Actually, it looked like only that green blow hard was against it." Daublin growled as the trio stepped into the Grand Lobby. Senators walked about, chatting with each other or looking at their comlinks. The blue armored Senate Commandos patrolled among them and stood watch at doors and balconies. Sampson chuckled at the gruff marine's remark while Shung just rolled his eyes. Sampson and the two marines pushed their way through the growing throng of senators. The decision of whether the Republic should ally with its newly discovered galactic neighbor was the most important decision of the war to date and the Senate was at nearly full attendance. As Sampson worked his way through the crowd he was bombarded with polite greetings, words of encouragement, thanks, and glares from a select few.

"May I have a word ambassador?" A voice asked above the steady rumble of feet and conversations. Senator Bail Organa stepped through the crowd.

"Of course Senator Organa, what can I do for you?"

"Myself and some fellow senators were concerned about the possibility of a large military buildup on the worlds upon which the UEG has already established embassies. We have no doubt that this treaty will be passed but we fear that this will make our worlds look like more appealing targets to Separatist assaults. We would like you to ask your government if the worlds of Naboo and Alderaan were to be made military strongholds. If this turns out to be true, we ask that you spare these planets for the time being."

"You don't trust us to keep them safe?" Sampson asked, wary of the two marines behind him. Daublin had bristled at the request.

"No no, it's not that, it's just we want to keep our worlds safe. I'm sure you understand." Organa gave him a sympathetic gaze. Sampson frowned.

"I'm sorry senator, I cannot make any promises that the UNSC will not fortify the small bases already established to guard the embassies but I will pass your request onto my superiors." Sampson's tablet beeped. "Excuse me, I need to return to my quarters to take a call."

"Of course Ambassador, see you in an hour or so." Organa gave him a friendly smile and walked away. Daublin grumbled something under his breath

"What was that sergeant?" Shung asked, eyes narrowing at his fellow marine.

"Nothin sir, just talking to myself."

"I'm sure whatever you said was what we were all thinking sergeant, let's get moving shall we?"

"Whenever you're ready sir, lead the way." Shung replied as he adjusted his belt so it was centered.

****Conference Room****

****Presidential Residence****

****Former Country of Switzerland****

****Earth****

****14:13 Standard UNSC Military Time****

"_I know you're frustrated Mr. President, I am too, but the way this Senate reaches a decision makes our congress look like a bunch of yes men." _Sampson said through the video screen as he sat in his quarters the Republic had set aside for him. ONI made sure it was clear of bugs and other listening or recording devices before placing a few of their own incase Sampson had guests. President Gandler sighed in frustration, rubbing his hands over his face.

"They're stalling us, they came crawling to us before we showed interest in joining the fight but now that we're ready to go all of a sudden it's sit around and wait." Gandler said as he angrily refilled his glass. Water gushed over the side and into his lap. With a curse he stood up, water sliding down his black dress pants. He grabbed a thick stack of napkins from the table and dried himself. "That red eyed bastard and his cronies were part of the Banking Clan which allied itself with the Confederacy until war was declared!"

"I understand your frustration, I am too. If we want to take the fight to the enemy we need bases in that galaxy that can support the movement of troops and ships. The public opinion of this war has already fallen after we released the casualty reports from Operation Boomerang." General Burnstone reminded as he helped the president mop up the water that had covered the table. Thankfully all the paperwork was digital now and the tablets were waterproof.

"It is in my humble opinion that the select group of Senators that now oppose us want this debate to last as long as possible, bringing up hundreds of minor grievances that frankly don't make sense. The longer we have to wait before we gain access to Republic worlds the more time the CIS has to prepare itself to either strike us or entrench in preparation for any assault we care to launch." The director voice still carried its signature monotone.

"_That reminds me sir. Besides Coursant, the worlds upon which we have already constructed embassies have asked us to not expand the bases there to fit our needs."_

"You've gotta be kidding me! It's like they're TRYING to chase us off now!" Burnstone grumbled.

"Is it because they fear their worlds will become enticing targets?" The Director asked calmly.

"_Precisely, despite the eagerness the Senate shows for allies, I believe it is more likely stemming from the ability to use us as cannon fodder. A majority here consider us primitive."_

"Savages to feed to the wolves. Look, I need to prepare for a speech to calm the rumblings in the House. Sampson, I need you to tough it out and get that treaty signed ASAP. We need to show the Republic that we can kick ass and take names. General, Admiral, once that treaty gets signed get in contact with their brass and see where we can fit in their grand scheme of things. We need to ensure our security gentlemen, we fought too long and too hard to lose it to a bunch of tin men in a far off galaxy."

****Archives****

****Jedi Temple****

****Courscant****

****Six Days After the Solarian-Republic Treaty****

Ashoka rubbed her weary eyes as she skimmed through another holobook. After her encounter with the Trandoshan raid and her rescue by the UNSC she was given a couple of weeks to recuperate from the ordeal. During this time she was instructed to meditate, assist the training of younglings, and assist chief librarian Jocata Nu in the Archives. After her first week Ashoka became frustrated, raring to get back in the war and to her master and the 501st. The council disagreed and instead questioned her on her encounter with the now so called "Solarians" as the Republic had now come to calling citizens of the United Earth Government. She told the masters everything she knew, from the design of their warships to the food they ate. The most troubling and intriguing aspect was the Solarians' lack of midi-chlorians. That meant the Force did not flow through them, nor did they have a tangible presence besides the confirmation that they were indeed living beings. The ramifications of such a being were the subject of heavy meditation and contemplation but so far no answers had surfaced. Whatever was the cause of the midi-chlorian loss was, the answers were not in the Force. Tests of mind manipulation and Force Grip proved that while Solarian minds could not be controlled, their bodies could still be moved and thrown. It was also discovered that this was considered assault and the two Jedi who experimented with this were imprisoned by UNSC Military Police.

Closing the book and logging off the terminal, Ashoka stretched her and headed for the main desk. Jocata was typing frantically on her terminal, updating the records with all relevant information on the UEG, UNSC, and the Solarians in general. The information was limited. The only history the UEG had decided to share was its reformation after the conclusion of the Human-Covenant War after the UNSC relinquished its emergency powers and the terra-forming and cleanup actions it conducted with the aid of their Shangheli allies. Details on the Human-Covenant War were scarce, detailing its commencement date, conclusion date, and its cost in lives, wealth, and worlds. The figures were staggering and suspected of being exaggerated. Acts of genocide in the galaxy were not unheard of, the Jedi Purge a millennia ago was proof of that, but not in the terms of a war on such a scale. Yet, the specifics of battles, leaders, and even what the Covenant was were denied to the Temple outside of the fact that it was a collection of alien species that caused the Solarians to be

viciously xenophobic. This was more of a warning issued by the UEG embassies to both the Republic and Confederacy when they brought up the idea of tourism and diplomatic visits to Solarian worlds. In the end, what the Republic and the Confederacy knew and understood about the Solarians was very little, and the UEG was content to leave it that way.

"I finished cataloging the new additions Master Nu, is there anything else?" Ashoka asked, hoping desperately that there wasn't. The old woman looked up and gave her a kind smile.

"No child, I believe your services here are no longer necessary. The Council has notified me that you are to return to active duty. Master Skywalker is here to retrieve you in the Dining Hall."

"He is?!" Ashoka said excitedly before self-consciously lowering her voice. "I mean, is he?"

"Yes Ashoka, he is. Good luck, may the Force be with you." Jocasta smiled again and waved her hand dismissively. Ashoka bowed.

"Thank you master, may it be with you as well." Ashoka headed for the exit, forcing herself not to run. She entered the main hallway and turned left, picking up her pace as she weaved through a line of younglings heading towards their lessons. The Temple was less crowded these days, the Jedi stretched as thin as the armies they commanded. She all but ran into the Dining Hall, spotting Anakin pacing by a table, a half eaten pastry in his hand. "Master!" she called out. Anakin looked up and grinned.

"Hey Snips, did you enjoy your vacation?" he teased, tossing the pastry into a trash bin.

"Ugh, it was boring, I missed being with the troops, though the brake from your horrible jokes was refreshing." She jabbed and he laughed.

"My jokes, like yours are any better?"

"Rex laughs at my jokes!"

"He's just being polite. It's more out of pity." Ashoka glared at him, causing him to laugh again. "It's good to have you back Snips!"

"Good to be back, how are the boys anyway?" Ashoka asked, hoping casualties had been light.

"Fine, bored really, we've been chasing down some convoys in the Outer Rim. We've got a big assault brewing, I'll fill you in on the way to the hangar."

****Jedi Cruiser **_**Conviction**_**

****Hyperspace Enroute to Geonosis****

****Two Weeks After the Solarian-Republic Treaty****

Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi watched the racing blue tunnel of Hyperspace whiz by, deep in thought. Despite his best attempts to

keep his composure, he still couldn't help but feel trepidious about the coming assault. This was to be the first joint operation between the Grand Army of the Republic and the UNSC. In hopes of easing his nerves, Obi-Wan reviewed the plan in his head. It was to be a three-pronged assault. The Republic would secure a landing zone on Point Rain, only a couple hundred kilometers from the primary droid foundry. The UNSC would provide naval support and re-enforce the Republic once the zone was secured. The joint army would then assault the foundry, destroy it, then sweep across the planet, destroying foundries as they went. The plan was simple, and the UNSC general insured his troops would do their part to the best of their abilities, but Obi-Wan still had his doubts. The UNSC's first combat action was a fiasco and a lot of people died. Now he was relying on them to keep his, Skywalker's, and Unduli's forces safe. The fact that the plan did not involve the UNSC coming in with the first wave would ensure that the most critical part of the assault would be handled purely by the GAR. There were grumbling amongst the UNSC officers but they agreed, as part of their treaty, to follow the Republic's methods.

"We're preparing to drop out of Hyperspace now sir, we should come into contact with UNSC as soon as they re-enter normal space." The captain announced. Obi-Wan nodded, stroking his beard. One of the major problems facing the allied powers was the difference in faster than light travel. Republic ships simply accelerated to the speed of light, never leaving the realm of space and able to communicate with any ship in range. The UNSC entered an entirely different dimension they called Slip-Space. As a result, UNSC vessels could travel faster and did not have to worry about colliding with stellar objects like stars, but the downside was the ship's inability to communicate with ships in the so called "normal" space.

"Thank you captain, notify me once we secure communications."

"Yes sir!" the captain saluted and returned to monitoring the ship's progress at his station. Obi-Wan watched as the fleet decelerated into orbit around the orange planet. No Confederate naval vessels challenged them, they had complete orbital dominance. The small UNSC fleet was already present, it's ships fanning out to begin an orbital bombardment.

"UNSC ships are already on station sir, establishing communications."

"Very good, let the show begin."

****UNSC Fleet Carrier **_**Alexandria**_** (CV-4)****

****High Orbit****

****Geonosis****

****Operation Sandstorm****

"What the hell are the ground pounders supposed to blend into?" Captain Grant "Phoneix" Dunn asked his wingman Maurice "Pretty Boy" Davinport. A squad of Marines had walked through the hangar in the new armor for the assault, which was a splotched pattern of bright and dull oranges.

"The ground moron, the planet's bright fuckin orange!" Pretty Boy replied as they made their way to the squadron ready room. Their squadron, VF-334, the Steel Talons, was to fly over watch for the Republic invasion force.

"Yeah, well the Troopers wear all white, so I think we just pissed away some taxpayer's retirement fund." Phoneix joked, using the more polite slang for the Republic's Clone Soldiers. The concept didn't sit well with most UNSC soldiers and a host of derogative and sympathetic nicknames rose up. Some generals even blatantly refused to work with them, calling it inhumane. The outcry wasn't lost on High-Command and the generals were dismissed. There was nothing they could do, High-Command announced, except work together to the best of their ability. They also passed an ultimatum. The clones would be treated with respect by all persons in the UNSC or face the consequence of imprisonment or worse.

"The brass wants to make sure our boys can blend in with the environment. Do you know what's easy to see against orange? White!" Pretty Boy defended. He felt sorry for the clones, as he did for the grunts in any army. He loved to fly and pititied those who slugged it out in the mud. Phoneix himself had been afraid to fly when he first joined the navy. This made his choice of flight school odd, but he wanted to avoid slogging around in the mud or getting sucked out of a hull breach. His flight training was enveloped with fits of terror and frustrated instructors. It was after he successfully recovered from a flat spin after getting caught in another pilot's jet wash during in altitude training that he gained the sudden boost in confidence and ego that seemed to make fighter pilots thrive. He had, in a sense, rose from the ashes. So when his buddies starting calling him "Phoneix" he acted indignant and offended. As per tradition, the more he denied it, the more it stuck. Pretty Boy had gotten his callsign when the flight instructor learned that he had pressed his flight suit before each flight. It was the man's nervous habit and he continued to do so, much to the joy of his squadron mates who ribbed him about it at every opportunity.

"Hey P.B., I see you prettied yourself up for the occasion as usual!" Vernon "Ballsy" Oaklen noted as the two pilots entered the ready room. Ballsy had gotten his call sign when he had gotten intoxicated at a bar on Reach and had promptly started waving his testicles at every woman in the bar.

"Only the best for you babe, at least my package ain't just for show."

"Alright gentlemen, I'm sure you both have a decent sized tool, please find your seats so we can begin!" The squadron's Operations Commander, Major Valdez, ordered as he gestured to the holographic display at the center of the room. The ready room was for each Carrier Air Group and consisted of a holographic display table circled with chairs. The walls were left free for the different squadrons in the CAG to decorate and each squadron claimed a wall as its own. Pictures, drawings, and souvenirs from all the different planets the squadrons had visited covered every available space on the walls. The only wall that was saved from the hands of the pilots was the far wall, which had a plaque that listed all the pilots that had served with the squadron. As the three pilots took their seats Major Valdez activated the projector. A holographic image of Geonosis, appropriately colored orange, appeared with blue and green

dots marking the Republic and UNSC fleets respectively. "Here's the dope, you are to provide air cover for Republic landing craft and ground forces as they establish a beachhead at Point Rain. The hologram zoomed in to show an aerial image of the objective. It was a large hill with a flat top. "The Republic is launching a three pronged assault, Skywalker from the East, Kenobi from the West, Undulli from the North." As each general was listed a blue arrow appeared showing the general direction of the transports. "Once they form a staging area you are to continue providing air cover. The rules of engagement are simple: If it flies, it dies.

Now, opposing you will be a joint Geonosian/Separatist force. You can expect to see both of their aircraft. There for, ONI has provided us with as much intelligence on their birds as possible. Here is the primary aircraft we predict the enemy has deployed." The hologram changed to that of an aircraft shaped like forked sphere with a bubble cockpit on the top. A single cannon protruded from the center. "This is the main fighter of the Geonosian Military, the Nantex class Territorial Defense Starfighter. It is a fast, manevureable platform with an estimated top speed of 1250 kilometers per hour atmosphere, but its single laser cannon gives it limited firepower." The projection changed again to showed an aircraft with a thin, ray shaped body with a long dome mounted towards the back. On each side were long, pronged wings. "This is the Variable Geometry Self-Propelled Battle Droid, Mark 1. That's a mouth full so they call it a Vulture Droid. This aircraft is not as manevurable as the Geonosian fighter but just as fast with heavier armament. It mounts four laser cannons, two energy torpedo launchers, and a lack of self-preservation. These are unmanned aircraft gentlemen, it has no remorse, no fear, and not a chance in hell of out flying you!" The pilots cheered in approval and Major Valdez switched off the projector. "Report to your aircraft and stand by for launch. Watch each other's backs and keep those skies clear. Good luck gentlemen, dismissed." The pilots stood and saluted, which Valdez returned, before grabbing their flight helmets from pegs on the far wall and filing towards the hangar bay.

****Hangar Bay****

****UNSC Assault Ship **_**Wilhelm II **_**(AS-55)****

****High Orbit****

****Geonosis****

****Operation Sandstorm****

"I look like a fucking art piece!" Corporal Jacob Meverston grumbled as examined his armored plates. The varying shades of orange were an annoying distraction and pissed him off more than it probably should have.

"That's because you keep your face all dolled up for us." Swift ribbed, gesturing to his own face. Meverston, like every other marine lounging about the hangar bay, had painted his face to match the surface of the planet as well. Harkston grunted but didn't say anything. This had been the fifth time Meverston had complained about his armor color. Every marine was grumbling, not about the armor, but about the fact that they were forced to wait until the battle was over before deploying planet side. As for how long this would take

was anybody's guess so Meverston and his fellow soldiers were following the age old tradition of the military. Hurry up and wait.

"Hey Sarge!" Swift called as he twiddled with the straps on his pack.

"Swift, I swear to god if you complain about the armor again, I'm shoving your helmet up your ass."

"â€| But it just clashes so much with my tote Sarge!" Swift and Meverston whined together. Harkston glared at them for about ten seconds before joining the other marines in their chuckles.

****Republic Gunship **_**Bantha Bait**_**

****Hangar Bay of Jedi Cruiser **_**Resolute**_**

****Low Orbit****

****Geonosis****

Ashoka checked to make sure her lightsaber was still attached to the hook on her belt as the clone troopers readied their weapons with a collection of clicks. "Are you sure you're up to this Rex?" she asked as the Captain secured his pistols in their holsters. Rex looked down at her and gave her a thumbs up.

"Of course commander, never felt fitter." Rex had been gravely wounded aboard the _Redemption_ and he owed his survival to the doctors aboard the UNSC ship _Patton_. After spending the last couple of months healing he was back in the fight and in command of Torrent Company. Ashoka's comlink beeped from its mount on her wrist. She tapped it once.

"Ashoka."

"_Are you all set Snips?"_ Anakin's voice asked from his own gunship.

"Ready to roll master!"

"_Great! All gunships, prepare to launch, form up on me."_ The steady beating of the gunship's repulsor drive started with a growl as the side doors snapped shut. The hangar bay on top of the _Resolute_ opened and the gunships soured out.

"_Attention pilots, UNSC fighters coming along side,"_ the sensor operator aboard the _Resolute_ reported. Through the thin slits in the gunship's doors Ashoka could make out the matte black form of the fighters. They were slender, with large swept back wings in the middle of their fuselage. The nose was a sharp point behind which was an opaque bubble canopy that shined a deep bronze. The plane continued, forming a wedge until it ended in a flap of rocket engines. Twin tails jutted upwards in a V shape.

"_Blue Actual, this is Raptor Flight, we'll guide you in."_ the UNSC pilot's voice sounded over the gunship's comms. The lead fighter rocked its wings in salute before the aircraft climbed to join its

fellows above the formation of gunships. As the gunships neared the surface black puffs began to fill the sky. Lasers soared past the slits of the doors

"_Enemy anti-aircraft fire, spread out!"_ the lead gunship ordered. The rest quickly spread out but one received a direct hit in its troop bay. The bottom half exploded, bodies tumbling to the ground below. The remaining upper half and wings crumbled into itself and it fell in a trail of flames. Another gunship was hit in the wing, losing grip on the AT-TE it was carrying under its belly. The walker dropped like a stone as the stricken gunship spiraled out of view. "_Seal blast doors!"_ Heavy armored plates slid over the viewing slits and the compartment was illuminated with red light. Suddenly, the gunship ducked and weaved.

"_This is Blue Five, we've got enemy fighters on our six! I repeat enemy fi-." _The transmission ended suddenly as the gunship blew apart with a direct hit. Ashoka felt the lives of the clones end in the Force and quickly blocked it out.

"_Raptors, engage, get those forked bastards off of them!"_ Ashoka tightened her grip on the strap above as she and the troopers were bucked left and right as the pilot frantically dodged the incoming fire. Suddenly, the gunship lurched and began to plummet.

"_We've been hit lads, hold on!"_ the pilot announced over the gunship link. Ashoka's heart rose to her throat as the gunship continued to fall. "_This is Blue Two, we're going down!"_

"_There's too many of them!"_ Another gunship pilot cried.

"_All fighters, keep the gunships cleared damn it!"_

"_Brace for impact!"_ the pilot yelled as he forced the gunship's nose up, its engine howling. Rex latched onto Ashoka and wrapped himself around her. In an instant, there was an earth shattering crash and the occupants were thrown forward. Ashoka saw the forward bulkhead race to meet her, then darkness.

**A/N: **_Here is the latest chapter. To help you picture the UNSC fighter (which will be explained in greater detail next chapter) just imagine a cross between the F-22 Raptor and the SU-27. Please leave a review and I hope to see you all next chapter. Hope you enjoyed!
â€"Arm Chair General_

14. Chapter 14

****F-49 Gladius Air and Space Superiority Fighter****

****1200 Feet above Geonosian Surface****

****Operation **_**Sandstorm**_**

Captain Grant "Phoenix" Dunn gritted his teeth as he yanked his stack back into his gut. His Gladius rocketed skyward, chasing down a Geonosian fighter that had made a pass at the Republic transports. The group of gunships had gotten jumped by the Geonosians, their fighters surprisingly stealthy. The Geonosian suddenly snapped rolled downward, corkscrewing into a steep dive. Phoenix followed, his

G-Suit keeping the blood in his head through the grueling maneuver. _You ain't get away that easy you son of a bitch!_ Phoenix lined up for a missile shot. A sharp tone sounded in his ears and he thumbed the button on his joystick. The radar homing missile dropped from the fighter's internal weapon's bay and surged forward. The Geonosian pulled up hard before rolling left and turning, his aircraft on its side. The missile struggled to follow before reaching the minimal proximity and detonating. The Geonosian disappeared in a ball of flame, wreckage spiraling downward.

"Whoo hoo, splash one bogey!" Phoenix announced through his helmet mike.

"_Kill confirmed Raptor 3, additional bogeys on your six 'o clock, 12 clicks and closing fast on those gunships."_

"Roger, am engaging." Phoenix rolled the aircraft onto its wing and pulled hard. The aircraft easily spun around in a sharp turn, responding to the faintest of input. The F-49 Gladius was the replacement of the long outdated Longsword. Faster, smaller, and more maneuverable than its predecessor, it became the UNSC's primary naval fighter. Mounting two 30mm Gatling Guns and internal hard points for eight missiles, the fighter had more than sufficient firepower to bring down all but the toughest of foes.

"_Jesus these things are fast!"_

"_He's on me tight, I can't shake him!"_

"_Shit, another gunship just went down, they're dropping like flies!"_

"_Hang tight, I'm on my way."_ The comm channel was filled with pilot reports. Raptor flight was heavily engaged in a running battle to keep the Geonosians at bay. Phoenix shoved the throttle forward to full burn. The Gladius quickly broke Mach 2 and screamed in. He locked onto an approaching Geonosian fighter.

"Good tone, Fox 2!" He thumbed the button and the missile soared from the bay. It closed rapidly until it suddenly verged left, cleanly missing the fighter. Phoenix's RADAR went haywire, flashing and lagging. "Shit, these things have jammers!" Red lasers soared over his canopy as he streaked by a pair of enemy fighters.

"_I can't get a RADAR lock on these fuckers!"_

"_Switch to Bloodhounds, bastards can't block heat!"_

"_Splash one!"_ Phoenix again pulled the stick into his gut. The Gladius climbed and began to loop around in an Immelman. He rolled the plane level, now behind the enemy fighters, who split up.

"P.B., where are you?!" Phoenix asked as he glanced right in time to see a Gladius spiral down in flames.

"_6 'O Clock high."_ Phoenix sighed in relief.

"Ok, you take the one on the left; I'll take the one on the right!"

"_On it!"_ The Geonosian dived to the deck, flying just meters above the sands. Phoenix dived after him, jinking and jerking the stick to keep level. A deep growling in his helmet signified that a Bloodhound missile had a lock on. He thumbed the button and the Bloodhound dropped from his fighter and slammed into the dirt. Thankfully the warhead didn't have enough time to arm. _Damn it, too low for missiles!_ He punched the throttle forward to full speed, hoping to close the distance. The Geonosian bucked and weaved, leading Phoenix away from the main fight.

"_Splash one, gotcha ya son of a bitch!"_ Pretty Boy cheered through his radio. Phoenix slowly gained on the fighter, struggling to keep it in his gun sights. The Geonosian suddenly climbed, rolled, and darted away to the right. Phoenix yanked his stick, copying the maneuver. He regained his position on the Geonosian's tail. Growling sounded in his helmet and he fired. Another Bloodhound dropped from the bay and surged forward. The Geonosian spun and dove in a crushing 11G turn. The missile struggled to follow before losing its lock and soaring away. Phoenix turned after it and the two pilots began to circle, each struggling to turn inside the other. The Geonosian began to ebb away as the nimbler Nantax out turned the Gladiator. Phoenix suddenly ended his turn, flying straight and level. The Geonosian quickly got on his tail, firing with reckless abandon. Phoenix wrenched his nose up, throttling down and using his airbrakes to prevent a climb. The Gladiator lost speed and the Geonosian overshot. Phoenix pushed his nose down, shoved the throttle forward, and jammed down the trigger. The twin cannons roared to life from where they were tucked next to the cockpit. Tracers arched over and then into the enemy fighter. The craft disintegrated, metal shrapnel flying in off in all directions as the tail end was chewed apart. The rest of the craft dropped to the ground and disappeared in a fireball. Phoenix blinked the sweat out of his eyes as he turned back to the fight, keying his microphone. "Splash two, at bingo fuel."

"_Copy that Raptor 3, RTB, enemy aircraft are retiring, 99 Raptors RTB."_

****Command and Control Center****

****UNSC Battleship **_**Belgium**_**

****High Orbit****

****Geonosis****

****Operation **_**Sandstorm**_**

"I don't give a damn about the treaty, the Jedi are scattered all over the fucking map down there!" General Chester "Papa" Gunderson roared as he watched the battle unfold. UNSC fighters had failed in their escort duties when the Geonosians swarmed them from out of nowhere. The fighters retaliated, receiving a number of casualties, and drove the enemy off. The Geonosians had lost a large number of aircraft because they seemed to charge in with reckless abandon, some even ramming gunships to get them out of the sky. The Republic had suffered heavy casualties as well, and the situation looked dire.

"Sir, the political ramifications could be-."

"I don't give a damn about politics. This is war and right now a lot of good people are dying to keep this plan afloat. The Republic fucked up, now we gotta save their asses or else this whole operation is gonna be one cluster fuck!" Despite the seriousness of the situation, a couple of the communications officers struggled not to smile. Gunderson was known for his crass language and mighty temper, but he cared for his boys. "Get a frigate into bombardment position to blow that Triple A to kingdom come! Kenobi has circled his wagons and alotta armor is coming his way. I want armor and anti-tank units on the ground to buy him time to get organized. Unduli has landed half her troops and is pushing to the point. I want strike planes on standby to wipeout whatever comes her way. Skywalker's force has been knocked out of the sky. Get some of our boys down there to round them up and then link up with Kenobi. The three pronged attack is no longer the plan gentlemen, we'll make do with two. I want our fighters, refueled, rearmed, and set to kill anything that moves!"

****Crash Site****

****120 Kilometers from Point Rain****

****Geonosis****

Clone Captain Rex gritted his teeth as he and another trooper lifted the jammed canopy clear of the fuselage of the crashed gunship. Ashoka grabbed the gunner, Deacon, with the Force and levitated him clear.

"Thanks commander." He gasped, struggling to his feet.

"Don't mention it." She replied as she patted his back plate. She turned and faced the group of clone survivors. Two had been killed in the crash, as had both ball gunners. Three other troopers were injured, one severely, and the pilot was unconscious. The remaining two (not counting Rex) had minor injuries, Ashoka herself sporting a bruise on the right temple and cuts on her hands, shoulder, and face. Their survival was due to the skill of the pilot, who had cushioned the landing as best he could. "Rex, can you give me an update on the status of the assault?"

The clone held his hand up to the side of his helmet. "Not good commander, most of the gunships are down and the Seppies are counter-attacking in force. Recommend we push onto the objective."

"There should be some stragglers who had the same luck as us." Deacon noted, pointing towards distant plumes of smoke. "We head to the point we should run into some survivors."

"What about the wounded, they are in no shape to move, especially Buxley here." One of the troopers, nick-named "Heaney," announced with concern.

"Right, here's the plan, Deacon, you, and Boxer will stay with the wounded. Me, Rex, and Corr will scout ahead and see who we can find. If you are found, call and we'll come running." The troopers who were capable snapped to attention and chorused a "Yes Commander!" before setting about preparing rudimentary defenses around the crash site and scavenging what they could. A roaring noise caught everyone's

attention and a pair of UNSC bombers streaked overhead. A frigate materialized through the clouds and tracers arched from its underside. "We best get moving Rex, the UNSC is engaging and it's gonna be a long walk."

****Pelican Dropship****

****Enroute to last known position of Torrent Company****

****Geonosis****

****Operation **_**Sandstorm**_**

Corporal Meverston shifted in his bucket seat as the Pelican hit a patch of rough air and bucked slightly. He could hear faint chatter in his ear piece as UNSC fighters again engaged Geonosian aircraft. This time the fighting was more one sided as the anti-air defenses of the frigate Sanderson intercepted the enemy before the fighters did. "We got smoke Captain!" the loadmaster announced, hand held to the side of his helmet as he listened to the pilot. Captain Donnovan nodded and released his restraints to stand. Grasping the handles that dangled from the roof he turned to face the 15 Marines in the bay.

"Alright, we got a crash site. Move in pairs and scour the area for any clones you can find. Report every trooper, casualty, or corpse you locate. If you find any droids or Buggers, slot 'em."

"Yes sir!" the Marines chorused. It was the same briefing that they had received before departing the transport. UNSC units were deploying at all three thrusts to support and reinforce. Meverston's company on the other hand was to locate the battered remnants of Skywalker's 501st and get them back to Kenobi. They were not to push on Point Rain.

"We're bringing her in, LZ looks clear Captain." The loadmaster informed as he checked his sidearm. Donnovan nodded and patted his own shoulders.

"Check equipment!" Bolts cycled, straps were tightened, and radio checks flooded the comm channel. Donnovan then lowered his arms to his sides, palms out, before raising them to chest level. "Stand up!" The Marines climbed up to their feet. Rifles, magazines, and orange armored plates clacked against each other as the men squeezed in close. The loadmaster hopped on a seat to get out of the way. The Pelican thumped to the ground and the ramp dropped quickly when the loadmaster tugged the release lever.

"Give 'em hell boys!" he cheered as the Marines charged out of the Pelican, forming a semi-circle around the entrance. Intense heat bore down on Meverston neck from the Pelican's jets as he took his position, crouching in the orange sand. "We're clear!" the loadmaster notified into his radio as he reached above him to pull down the machine gun turret that was secured to the roof of the bay. It slid down and fixed with a clank as the Pelican rose from the ground, kicking up a cloud of orange dust. Meverston and the other Marines quickly pulled up their orange mouth wraps, thankful for the goggles that covered their eyes.

"Spread out, check for survivors!" Donovan ordered and Meverston began his search in the direction of the arrow that suddenly appeared on the small tactical eyepiece that covered his left eye. Swift fell in next to him as the Marines trudged through the sand. "_Mev, Swift, check the gunship!"_

"Yes sir!" Meverston slowly approached the scorched hulk, rifle ready. The transport had crashed on its side, left wing pointing skyward. The engine compartment was still burning and the side doors were open. The co-pilot's body was still slumped in his seat, helmet staring blankly at a sparking display. Multiple clone bodies were scattered around, their weapons littering the ground.

"Christ, looks like no one survived." Swift announced, shaking his head.

"Hang on, something's not right." Meverston said, scanning the aftermath. Five clone troopers were separated from their comrades and they looked to have been torn limb from limb. "These guys didn't die in the crash." Swift bent down and picked up the long black rifle the troopers favored. A slight scent of ozone drifted from its muzzle.

"Weapon's been fired." Meverston scanned the landscape. The Marines were spread out in a big circle, each pair slowly checking each boulder and crevice. The Pelican flew above in a lazy circle, chin gun swiveling with the pilot's gaze. In the distance, the clouds flashed as the _Sanderson _pounded targets far to the west. "Blood here too, not human." Meverston turned to see Swift poke a light green puddle with a finger. _Geonosians!_ Meverston keyed his mike.

"Sir we may have a situation, some of the troopers were killed by the Buggers!"

"_Understood Corporal, move on to your sector. Everyone, keep an out for Geos."_

"_Got some kind of tunnel here sir, goes down- OH SHIT!"_ The Marine's voice was cut off by gunfire as the two men sprayed whatever was in the tunnel. Geonosians swarmed from the hole, their weird cannons firing. The Marines turned to run but were quickly cut down.

"_AMBUSH! EYES UP!"_ Donovan ordered as the Geonosians suddenly poured from every crevice. Meverston turned and fired, bullets shredding a Geonosian warrior. Swift's DMR barked in quick succession as he fired the weapon as quickly as its bolt would cycle. The two Marines dived behind the wrecked gunship as the Pelican's chin gun roared. Marines began to fall left and right, having been caught by surprise and far from cover. Donovan was grabbed by the armpits by two warriors and dragged aloft. He screamed as he was suddenly let go and he landed with a sickening crunch of bone.

"_Fall back to the gun-, fall back to the crash!"_ Their lieutenant, Nichols, ordered as he grabbed an injured marine and dragged him, firing his assault rifle one-handed. Meverston ducked as the strange green rounds from the Geonosian weapons slammed into the armored hull of the gunship. His rifle clicked empty and he fumbled for a magazine. The Pelican kept firing, backing away rapidly to keep from

getting swarmed. The remaining Marines ducked beneath rocks and wreckage as the tide began to turn. Geonosians fell all around as the Marines were finally able to steady their aim. Limbs, wings, and other appendages littered the ground above a carpet of green blood. Five Geonosians pounced on a marine and he was torn apart before his friends cut down his attacker. Meverston felt a shadow go over him and he looked up just before a Geonosian grabbed him by the waist.

"Shit, one's got me!" He was dragged skyward as the alien screeched at him. He thrashed and kicked, driving his helmet into the things gut. A sudden flash of green light appeared in his vision and the Geonosian collapsed, head tumbling away. Meverston fell with a yell before he was suddenly caught by an unseen force and lowered to the ground. He landed in a heap and he struggled to his feet. Blue lasers whirled around as a group of clone troopers blasted the Geonosians alongside the Marines. With a large collective cry, the surviving Geonosians fled back to their tunnels. The Marines cheered once and mercilessly shot them in the back. A loud silence suddenly filled the air before the wounded began to call out. Meverston staggered back to the crash site and collapsed against a rock. The clones had gathered a good distance away while Harkston called back the scattered Marines. Their casualties were moderate. Alongside Donnovan, seven other Marines were dead. Two were wounded and the rest a little shaken.

"You alright Mev?" Swift ask as he handed him his canteen. Meverston took a shaky sip before spitting it out in the sand. He and the other Marines were covered in the stuff; it just seemed to get everywhere. With a nod he handed the canteen back to Swift and then vomited on the ground. He had been so close to dying. He knew a soldier's life was dangerous, everybody did. But being hoisted up in the air was the scariest thing that could have happened. It reminded him of the clean up action in New Alexandria where his platoon had cleared out a Drone hive. What was affectionately dubbed "The Great Bug Hunt" quickly became a nightmare as the things attacked out of the dark, grabbing a Marine before whizzing back to the shadows. Sometimes an arm or head would drop back. Wiping his mouth on his dusty forearm plate he took a gulp from his own canteen and rinsed out his mouth before taking a long drink. He glanced back at the clone troopers. They were talking to a short alien girl with orange skin and white and blue striped head tails. The girl suddenly jogged over, a clone with blue highlights on his arm following her.

"Are you alright?" she asked, concerned. Meverston nodded, standing up straight.

"I'm fine, just a little air sick." She smirked and turned to look at Lieutenant Nichols, who came jogging up to them.

"Commander Tano, Captain Rex, glad to see you all in one place." At the Lieutenant's announcement of rank the Marines that were stood a little straighter than normal but didn't come to attention or salute. This wasn't out of disrespect but to prevent Commander Tano from losing her head to a sniper. Again as per the treaty, UNSC forces were to fall within the Republic Chain of Command. This caused major grumblings in the Officer Corps as UNSC officers considered themselves superior to the Republic's Jedi Generals. The Jedi were superb combat leaders on the battlefield, but if the current stalemate was any indication, galaxy wide strategy was sorely

lacking.

"Likewise uhâ€¦" Tano faltered as she realized she didn't know Nichol's name and rank.

"Lieutenant Nichols ma'am, are these all of your men?" he asked.

"So far, we have been trying to locate other survivors when you showed up."

"Understood, as of now you are the highest ranking officer present and we are now under your command." There was a trace amount of bitterness in Nichol's voice. Meverston understood Nichol's feelings. They had lost the battle hardened and well loved Donnovan only for him to be replaced with an alien preteen mystic with a glorified glow stick. "Our current orders are to locate the survivors of this crash site and recover them. After doing so we are to link up with General Unduli and push towards Point Rain."

Tano shook her head, headtails swinging slightly. "No, we are going to locate General Skywalker and his men and push towards Point Rain with him."

"With all due respect Commander we are in no condition to do such thing. Skywalker's attack has been shot to pieces. The UNSC is devoting its assets to support the other two assaults already in progress."

"This is all the more reason to support him now, if no one else will!" Tano shot back.

"Negative, we're leaving, our orders come from our general and his over power yours. I respectfully suggest you prepare your wounded for transport whilst we do the same."

"Fine, Rex, get the wounded ready to be moved, then gather the rest of the men. We're going to find Anakin."

"I respectfully suggest otherwise Commander; your men will not make it there." Nichol's countered, temper flaring. The rest of the Marines took up defensive positions, tended to their wounded comrades, or watched the current argument.

"Then you're coming with us!"

"Negative ma'am, we are getting you and your troopers out of here!"

"I'm ordering you to help me _Lieutenant!_ Get the wounded on the transport and get your men ready to move out now!" Meverston frowned as the diminutive Tano suddenly pulled rank. Swift looked uneasy and he shuffled his feet. Captain Rex helped a wounded trooper over to where the UNSC medics were treating their friends. One of them pounced on the trooper immediately and began asking him questions. Rex had marked triage symbols on the trooper's helmet to signify what treatment he had received but UNSC and Republic symbols were different. The Pelican finally landed after making sure the area was clear and the Marines and Troopers began loading the wounded.

"Commander, the Lieutenant is right, I believe General Skywalker is already pulling back to General Kenobi's position. We should do as the Lieutenant says. Either way, we can't stay here arguing." Captain Rex advised, returning to his spot behind her right shoulder.

Tano sighed before nodding her head. "Alright, let's get moving then." Harkston jumped at the opportunity.

"Alright right you heard the lady, shift it!" Meverston sighed with relief as the consensus was made. As he, Swift, and the Marines and troopers climbed over the wounded and settled in their seats, Nichols and Tano apologized to each other. Meverston suddenly felt a pang of dread. _If all the decision making is like this, then we've already lost this war._

_**A/N: **_The invasion has begun. Sorry for the delay again, but life has really beaten me down. I hope this chapter makes up for the wait. Please leave a review telling me what I did right, what I did wrong, and how you feel the story is going so far. I would also like to take the opportunity to return the favor to my good friend DeltaV. He writes Five Nights at Freddy's fiction and he gave me a shout out in his Author's Notes so I'm doing the same. Check him out if you care to do so, I really enjoy his work! Until the next chapter!-Arm Chair General_

15. Chapter 15

Scorpion Mark III Main Battle Tank **_Murder Inc.**_

6**th**** Armored Division**

Enroute to Defensive Circle of the 214**th**** Attack Battalion**

Geonosis

Operation **_Sandstorm**_

"Keep your eyes peeled boys, this terrain is flat as fuck." Sergeant Maximillan Schreiber ordered as he peered through his command sight. The tank raced along the orange sand, tracks sending up great plumes as they charged to Republic position at 52 kilometers an hour. _Murder Inc._ was part of a platoon of 14 tanks that were rushing to relieve the pressure on the embattled 214th.

"Got it Max, eyes up, trigger ready." The gunner, Hector Sunderland responded eyes glued to his heads up display. The Scorpion Mark III was an enlarged and upgraded model of the original Scorpion. The old Scorpion tanks proved to be outgunned by heavier Covenant tanks and the Grizzly variants didn't fare much better. The older tanks were not heavily armored in order to enable them to be transportable by Pelican and their 90mm cannons failed to punch through heavier targets. Adding to the ineffectiveness was the most recent variant's replacement of the coaxial machine gun in the turret with a one mounted on the hull in front of the driver. Because of this, the machine gun could not engage target directly behind the tank, forcing the entire vehicle to rotate in order to bring the gun to bear. Because of these limitations, the UNSC redesigned the Scorpion from

the ground up. It was enlarged, removing the quad tank pods with a pair of tracks that ran the length of the vehicle. Its turret was re-centered on the chassis and now mounted a 120mm Smoothbore High Velocity Cannon and a .50 caliber coaxial machine gun. Its armor was increased to 50mm of Ceramic-titanium armor with a crystalline layer to disperse plasma and energy rounds. Able to travel nearly 55 kilometers an hour and with a maximum range of 700 kilometers fully fueled, it was a truly fearsome war machine. The drawback was that the increase in size, armament, and armor increased the weight of the vehicle to 115 tons fully loaded it was incapable of being transported by all but the Pod heavy dropships and now required a three man crew as opposed to two: a gunner, loader, and commander. The older Scorpions were repurposed as cavalry tanks to be dropped in with airborne units or scout ahead of the main force.

"We got some heat sigs up ahead! Kenobi's circled his wagons alright. They're taking a pounding!" The driver, Vincent Smith reported.
"They're at our two 'o clock!"

"_Alright Hammer, listen up. There are multiple enemy armored units directly opposite of us on the circle's far side. Ferdinand, take your men to the right. I'll go left. We're gonna surround them and put ourselves between the Seppies and the walkers." _Colonel Jeremiah Stuart ordered from his command tank in the front of the platoon.

"_Copy that sir, let's get some boys!"_ The tanks split, seven moving left, seven going right. Red lasers began to streak by as the Separatists noticed the platoon.

"Target, Spider Walker, 4:00, 500 meters and closing, Armor Piercing!" Max directed as he stared through his sight.

"I got 'em, sending!" Hector replied and pulled the trigger, which made a satisfying click. The tank shuddered backward as the 120mm round flew from the barrel. It punched through the walker's circle body and it blew apart, legs collapsing inward. There was a series of clacks as the auto-loader readied another armor piercing shell.
"Set!" Bursts of thunder sounded all around as the other tanks opened fire. Three AATs and two spider walkers went up in flames. The other tanks either missed or the shells bounced off the enemy's armored plating. _Murder Inc. _shook as it took a round from an AAT.

"Jesus! Ice that son of a bitch!" Vincent demanded as he kept the throttle gunned.

"AAT, 5:00, 300 meters and closing, AP!"

"Sending!" The tank shuddered again and the round bounced off the enemy tank's armored front. The enemy returned fire, red streaking from its dual laser cannons. A spider walker fired its man gun, the beam tearing through the tank _Kitten_. It exploded as the beam tore through the shell locker, setting off the ammunition stored within. The AT-TEs kept up a constant barrage as the UNSC tanks roared in. Battle droids were crushed beneath the treads of the tanks as the remaining enemy units began to retreat.

"_New orders, don't circle, just force them back!" _Colonel Stuart ordered over the roar of guns. The tanks formed a jagged line abreast and kept pushing, firing as they went.

"_This is Halberd 2-5 we'll be arriving on station ETA seven minutes, prepared to engage all targets, over."_

"_Roger that Halberd, good to have ya!"_

"Infantry front!" Max announced as he thumbed the button for the co-axial. The gun roared to life with deep, rapid thumps. Tracers arched into the metal bodies of the battle droids as their laser bounced off the thick armor of the Solarian tanks. Clones had formed up behind the tanks, using them for mobile cover as they cut down the enemy. A UNSC tank ground to a halt when a round blew off its right track. Its turret swiveled and blasted apart the AAT that had disabled it.

"_New contacts, eleven o' clock!"_ the commander from the tank _Rambo_ notified, an arrow appearing on Max's command sight. He swiveled his periscope and saw seven Hail-Fire Droids racing towards the platoon on their giant wheels. The surviving AT-TEs opened fire, sending one droid tumbling as its wheel was blown away. The droids unleashed a hail of rockets. An AT-TE lost its front legs and toppled forward, crushing troopers that had taken positions underneath. A UNSC tank detonated as multiple rockets struck home. _Murder Inc._ shook as a rocket bounced off the turret and spiraled away. The remaining tanks swiveled their turrets as fast as possible. Another walker fell to the Hail-Fires as the tanks turned and counter charged the new threat. Their guns roared and two more droids were blasted apart.

"_Halberd 2-5 to Hammer, targets in sight, engaging enemy light armor to your front, danger close."_

"_Understood, hit the brakes boys!"_ Colonel Stuart ordered and the tanks slid to a stop in the sand. A pair of Hawk gunships roared over head, unleashing a volley of anti-tank missiles. Three Hail-Fires disappeared in balls of flame. The last one sent a poorly aimed volley at the gunships, which easily strafed left to avoid them before tearing the droid apart with their auto-cannons.

"_Hammer you are all clear, no tangos in site or on screen. We'll stick around for as long as we can._" The Hawk pilot notified as the gunships circled above the tanks. Troopers were cheering, waving their hands and rifles. _"All hail the conquering heroes."_

"_This is Kenobi, you have my thanks, we were in quite a spot here. Some of your dropships are inbound with re-enforcements, we need to strengthen our defensive positions and make ready to get the wounded out. Position your tanks around my walkers, my men will care for your wounded Colonel."_

"_Understood General. You heard the man, spread out and stand fast. If anything gets past you there'll be hell to pay. We ain't finished yet!"_ Max sighed as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Take us to the left Vincent, we gotta a long day ahead." Max ordered as he peered through his sight.

"Yes sir."

****Wrecked AT-TE****

****40 Kilometers from Point Rain****

****Operation **_**Sandstorm**_**

Corporal Meverston hunkered down behind the destroyed walker as lasers blazed past him. The clone trooper he had taken cover with popped out around the shattered wind screen of the walker and fired off a couple of rounds from his unusually long rifle before ducking back down.

"We've got fixed gun emplacements built into a collection rocks, five clicks from us!" the trooper pointed in emphasis as more laser rounds clanged off the walker's armored hull. A Hail-fire droid rolled past them, spewing rockets. A Scorpion tank blew apart, showering the orange sand with smoking metal fragments. An Anti-tank trooper let loose a rocket of his own and the droid crumpled into itself as its central body ceased to exist. An orange blur suddenly dropped from behind and Meverston swung around. His sights found Ashoka staring wide eyed back at him, lightsaber raised defensively.

"Christ ma'am, you almost took a bullet!" Meverston chastised as he lowered his weapon. Ashoka grinned.

"Jumpy?" Meverston frowned at the childish banter. She noticed and her expression turned serious. "What's the situation?"

"Fixed guns, five clicks from our current position!" the trooper replied dutifully. Ashoka nodded as Swift sprinted towards them, two clone troopers right behind. They ducked behind the walker as a volley of deadly red beams stitched the sand behind them.

"What's up Corporal?" Ashoka asked. Swift clearly ran over here for a reason.

"We got tanks moving up now, Commander, and Undulli and her Padawan are with them." Swift reported. A Scorpion tank clanked up to them as he spoke and fired its main cannon. Ears ringing, Meverston watched as one of the bunkers was blown apart. A rocket suddenly surged from the hilltop and slammed into the tank. It rocked back on its treads and began to belch smoke. Flames leapt from the viewports.

"Shit!" Meverston and Swift ran towards the tank. A stream of red lasers forced them back. Ashoka leapt over the walker and landed atop the turret of the burning tank. Deflecting lasers with one hand she sliced through the turret's top hatch with the other. Wrenching the hatch free with the Force she devoted her full attention to deflecting the incoming fire.

"Come on, get outta there!" she ordered. Three men in stained and burnt jumpsuits climbed out, one being supported by the others as the scrambled behind the walker. Ashoka hopped to the ground and sprinted after them. The tank continued to burn, flames now bursting from the open hatch.

"Thanks ma'am, we owe ya one." The tank's commander wheezed. His jumpsuit read Gregory.

"Don't mention it!" Ashoka replied back, face serious. "Looks like the Seps have our armor stuck in place."

"_Eagle this 3__rd__ Platoon, requesting air strike on grid coordinates 345 degrees North by 29 degrees west. Authorization Code Charlie Niner Tango Whiskey. Target is fixed enemy fortifications and AT emplacements, Danger Close!"_ Meverston's radio crackled to life as their Forward Observer called in the strike.

"_Understood 3__rd__ Platoon, a flight of Shortswords are inbound. Confirmed Danger Close."_

"We got droids on the right, blast them!" One of the troopers called out and he began firing. Meverston crouched behind him. B1 battle droids were marching towards them line abreast like a scene from the Napoleonic War books he was forced to read in high school. Ignoring his sudden memory he sighted his rifle and fired a quick burst. A droid took the rounds in the chest and toppled, tripping it's comrade behind it. The droids quickly began to return fire and Meverston ducked back. The trooper screamed as a red laser caught him on the shoulder. Meverston grabbed him by the back of his neck guard and dragged him back behind the walker. The sudden roaring of engines caught his ears as a pair of green triangles appeared on his HUD, pointing backwards. He turned in time to see the pair of bombers release their payloads.

"GET DOWN!" Swift yelled as the bombs blew apart the bunkers. The ground was suddenly tugged out from under him and Meverston collapsed in a heap. His ears were ringing and his vision blurred from the overpressure.

"_Target destroyed, all tanks advance!" _A voice from his radio ordered. Meverston staggered to his feet, the troopers already beginning to move with their brothers. Tanks rumbled past as a clone medic ran up to them. With the tankers acting as stretcher bearers the wounded was sent back. Lieutenant Nichols sprinted up to him as the joint armies began the final push on Point Rain.

"Let's go Marines, shift it! Sooner we take that hill, the sooner we get to get off this sand ball!" Shaking away his disorientation, Meverston and Swift fell in with their fellow Marines as the slopes of Point Rain came into view.

****Command and Control Center****

****High Orbit****

****Geonosis****

****UNSC Battleship **_**Belgium**_**

****Operation **_**Sandstorm**_**

General Gunderson looked over a nervous ensign's shoulder at his screen. Live high altitude footage was playing from an observation satellite deployed from the _Belgium_, which was relaying the progress of the assault. Undulli was already climbing the hill, Kenobi not far behind on his side. Red, green, and blue laser fire created a spectacular light show punctuated by orange blossoms of flame as the Shortswords dispersed their deadly payloads. As the Republic and UNSC pushed up their respective sides Gunderson noticed the CIS pulling its troops back on the one un-assaulted side of the

hill.

"The enemy is trying to retreat down the rear slope, order the _Sanderson_ to move a new bombardment position and blast the bastards to kingdom come!" Gunderson shouted over his shoulder. The room was full of the clattering of keys and the terse radio communications.

"Yes sir!" One of the Communication Officers, Rebecca Phillips, replied and sent the appropriate message to the _Sanderson's_ commander. A short reply message was received and Gunderson watched as the _Sanderson_ eased over a large spire of rock and began pouring cannon rounds into the opposite side of the hill.

"Sir, reports just coming. Point Rain is ours!" another Comm. Officer announced. The room burst into cheers, Gunderson raising his hands in the air to quiet them.

"Focus ladies and gentlemen, we still have a war to win! Fredrickson, prepare a Pelican for launch, I'm going to the front!" Gunderson ordered his aid as he stepped into his quarters.

"Right away sir!" Fredrickson replied. The rest of the men and women in the room glanced at each other. Gunderson's visits to the front was of his activities that made him popular with the troops, but to visit a recently captured position was dangerous to the point of recklessness. The general was known to put his own personal safety beneath the needs of his soldiers and lived by the creed that he wouldn't ask of his men anything he wouldn't do himself. So if his troops were digging holes in the sand with a bunch of clones and mystics than he'd be damned if he didn't go out there and dig one himself.

Gunderson emerged shortly after in full Battle Dress, the orange armor looking hilariously out of place. Despite routine runs, the 60 year old general had gone a little to seed and his stomach bulged slightly over his belt harness. He attached a Magnum to his hip and grabbed a helmet with his name written on the back. There were no symbols of rank on his armor; instead his Field Identification Tag would transmit his rank to the HUDs of his fellow Marines. Fredrickson, himself in full armor, returned with a pair of ODSs trailing behind him. Gunderson gave a sly grin as he noticed the two were not his usual "handlers." All generals and admirals traveled with armed escorts when in the field, it would have been stupid to do otherwise, and Gunderson was famous for giving his guards a run for their money. The joke amongst the Officer Corp. was that Gunderson's guards were to protect the enemy from him as opposed to the other way around. The aid and troopers snapped to attention and saluted.

"At ease, you boys ready?" Gunderson asked as he saluted then offered his hand to shake. Each ODS gripped his hand and gave an enthusiastic "Yes sir!" Gunderson nodded and looked at his aid, who gave him a thumbs-up. "All right, let's get going!"

****Field Tent****

****Point Rain****

****20 Minutes After the Assault****

"Why would we have your squires sneak inside when we can just destroy the foundry from orbit?!" The UNSC general asked Masters Kenobi and Undulli in disbelief. "How would they even sneak in?"

"Simple, we launch a full frontal assault-." Skywalker started, beginning to point at the rock bridge that led to the foundry's front door.

"A frontal assault?! Jesus H. Christ you have no idea what you're doing!" The UNSC general, Gunderson, accused, mortified. "I'm not sending my boys to die needlessly. It would be a fuckin' waste!" Kenobi, Undulli, and Skywalker bristled and Ashoka had to keep her own temper in check. The crass general had arrived via a Solaran Dropship they called a "Pelican" shortly after one of their frigates had blown apart the retreating enemy forces. Unduli's padawans, Barris Offee, looked on impassively at the raging discussion. Technically Gunderson fell under Republic command, seeing as his rank was equal to that of the Jedi Masters, but he clearly didn't care.

"I ask that you refrain from using such language general, it is hardly appropriate for the situation." Kenobi chastised politely. He placed a hand on Anakin's shoulder when his apprentice opened his mouth to speak. "A simple orbital strike may not be enough. This is their primary factory and its tunnels good go on for miles. We may not be able to thoroughly destroy all their equipment, which could fall into the enemy's hands for later use."

"Then send in some of your commandos or my ODSs. Why do we have 'ta send in the kids?" Gunderson asked.

"We're not kids!" Ashoka protested, glaring at him. Gunderson glared back like an angry parent.

"Padawan Tano is right General, they are very capable fighters and are more powerful than you give them credit for." Undulli added, rising to defend her charge.

"It is still an unnecessary risk! I say we just blast the bastard to kingdom come and then sift through the pieces and smash what we didn't break." Gunderson's own temper was on the verge of breaking as well.

"What you say and what you can do are to entirely different things general," Anakin snapped. "In the end we make the final decision on what we do. This is our war and you will fight our way!"

"Anakin!" Kenobi warned but Gunderson had been pushed to the breaking point. Fredrickson, Gunderson's aid, unconsciously took a step back and waited for the torrent that was soon to come.

"Now listen here boy," Gunderson growled as he jabbed a finger at the Jedi. "I don't give a damn about what agreement our politicians reached. I don't give a damn about whatever mystical bullshit you like to sling around. And I certainly don't give a damn about your Free Sample Stars! So don't you go waving around a pile of legal papers and try to pull rank. You have no rank, not to me. And if you so much as think about ordering my boys to throw away their lives I'm gonna shove your glorified glow stick so far up your mystical ass

you'll glow like New Year's fucking Day!"

"You gotta lot of nerve for a man whose army came crawling to us for help!" Anakin retorted.

"Says the man who led half his company to their deaths!" Gunderson roared back

"Coming from the people who wasted hundreds to save dozens!" Gunderson's eyes widened and he went to lunge. Fredrickson grabbed his arm to keep the general from throwing a punch.

"ENOUGH!" Obi-Wan roared. "This squabble ends right now! We are all frustrated with the mistakes we made but this does not help the situation! General Gunderson I apologize for my Padawan's behavior but you need to compose yourself. And Anakin," he fixed his Padawan with a glare. "you must give these people their respect. Unfortunate events have thrown their lot in with ours and we need to work together to prevent further catastrophes." Anakin nodded and shot a glare at Gunderson. The general took a deep breath before sticking out his unrestrained arm. Anakin took it and both men mumbled apologies.

"Excellent, now that we are all behaving like adults, let us plan are next move. General Gunderson, since you disapprove of an assault and we disapprove of a strike from orbit, can you please suggest a third option?" Undulli said calmly. Gunderson nodded and stepped back to the map.

"You still want a distraction, I want minimal casualties. What I suggest is that we draw them out. Set up defenses here, here, and here. Thenâ€¦"

**A/N: **_Sorry for the delay. Hope you enjoyed. Have a good one!_

16. Chapter 16

Point Rain

15 Minutes Later

Operation **_Smokescreen**_

"We're going to send out a skirmishing force to draw the Seppies's attention." Colonel Stuart announced to the gathered tankers and Cobra crews. "We lure their forces away by making it look like we're a tempting target then coax them into attacking the Point. The place where we can really fuck this up is after the Tin Men take the bait. You'll be in a fighting retreat all the way back to the Point. The _Sanderson _is moving out of bombardment range to avoid deterrence and air support will be limited unless things really escalate. We want to keep them interested as long as possible. To further distract the enemy, we are launching diversionary air strikes and landings at other foundries and their beloved Arena. While we keep 'em occupied, two Jedi Padawans and a squad of Army Rangers are going to infiltrate and blow the facility. Any questions?"

A Cobra crewman in the front raised his hand. "Just one Colonel, when

do we start?"

****Staging Area****

****Operation **_**Smokescreen**_**

Ashoka glanced at the five men standing in a line in front of her from her spot just outside the command tent. Luminara's Padawan, Barris Offee, was standing on the other side engrossed in a data pad. The Rangers were dressed in the same ridiculously colored yet surprisingly effective body armor the other UNSC troops wore, except for one who wore an armored flame-retardant suit and had a large tank clasped to his back. What set these soldiers apart were their helmets. Instead of the open-faced helmet with the tactical HUD covering one eye they had a sort of face shield. A slit of a visor allowed them to see and appeared to have a built in Heads-Up Display. Spot lamps were attached to one side and the commander had a small radio antenna on the other. The suited soldier's helmet was also different, with an opaque golden full face visor.

Ashoka turned and noticed Barris was staring at them too. One of the Rangers glanced at them before looking forward. He appeared to be laughing. At that moment Obi-Wan, Anakin, Luminara, and General Gunderson walked out of the Command Tent and stopped in front of the group. A UNSC bomber roared overhead, heading to an unknown target. All around them UNSC tanks and armored vehicles were roaring to life. Obi-Wan had to shout to be heard. The Rangers snapped to attention.

"Gentlemen, Padawans. As you know, your target is the Geonosian's Primary Droid Foundry." He held out his hand and a hologram of the foundry appeared from his palm. "Your mission is to infiltrate and destroy it using the charges we gave you." Luminara stepped in.

"Your infiltration point is an opening in a moat at the base of the foundry. It leads into their tunnel system which travels into the heart of the facility." The hologram shifted accordingly, showing the tunnels and highlighting the route they would take. Gunderson spoke up.

"We're gonna launch a series of airstrikes and our pseudo attack against the facility. You will be transported by Warthog to the edge of the moat as far from the bridge as we can place ya'." Gunderson took a step back and Luminara continued.

"From there you will rappel down and enter the tunnel. My Padawan, Barris Offee, will guide you through the tunnels to the main reactors. The Padawans will then plant their charges and exit the facility before detonation. Rangers, you will escort them to their destination and back. If they are spotted, you are to assist in their escape. You move out in 10 minutes. I suggest you make your introductions." With that, Luminara, Gunderson, and Obi-Wan went back inside the tent. Anakin crouched and put a hand on Ashoka's shoulder. The Rangers began compiling equipment and weapons, grabbing boxes from a small depot by the Command Tent.

"You ready for this Snips?" he asked. Ashoka nodded, chin held high.

"You bet, those bugs won't know what hit 'em!" Anakin grinned before glancing warily at the mingling Rangers who had separated themselves from the two Jedi once the briefing was over.

"Be careful Ashoka, I didn't want to have the UNSC involved in this mission and they might blow your cover. Just try to make it back in one piece, ok?"

"I will master." She replied. Anakin nodded in satisfaction.

"May the Force be with you Ashoka."

"You too Sky Guy." Anakin walked into the tent and Ashoka walked over to the Rangers. They turned as she approached.

"Afternoon Commander Tano." One of the Rangers, the one with the radio antenna, stepped forward and saluted. "I'm Staff Sergeant Carthum and this is Hoplite." He gestured to the other four Rangers. "This is Corporal Xing, our demolitions man." Xing saluted casually before pulling out a breaching charge from a small box at his feet and strapping it onto his armor. "Next is our gunner, Corporal Rodriguez." Rodriguez slapped a drum magazine into his SAW before giving the two Padawans a thumbs up. "Private First Class Wenderson, the flamethrower man." Wenderson nodded respectfully. "And Private First Class Duncaster, our sniper." The last Ranger stood and crossed his arms before nodding. Ashoka sensed a grin on his face. He was the Ranger who had laughed earlier.

"Greetings gentlemen, I am Padawan Learner Barris Offee." Barris greeted with a bow. The Rangers nodded to her in greeting. Duncaster took a step closer, looking the two Jedi up and down before shaking his head.

"You got a problem _Private_?" Ashoka asked.

"Just wondering how we're gonna fit all the cookies in the truck," Duncaster replied. "I know you Girl Scouts have a quota to keep." Ashoka bristled, despite not knowing what exactly a Girl Scout was, but his tone clearly suggested an insult.

"We got plenty of cookies Dunny Boy, 'cept these go boom!" Xing teased, using his hands to mimic the blast radius of his imaginary explosion.

"Knock it off!" Carthum ordered, infuriated. "Dun, stow that talk right goddamned now! These are our superior officers and you will treat them with respect! I'd hate to see you on the receiving end of one of The Old Man's lectures." Duncaster grumbled but nodded.

"Yes Sarge." He turned to face the Padawans. "My sincerest apologies for my behavior Commanders, I was out of line." Ashoka could practically smell the sarcasm in his voice. Ashoka glanced at Xing who pointed at Duncaster before signaling the universal symbol for insanity. He then gave her a reassuring thumbs up before returning to packing the explosives.

"This is going to be quite the long mission, isn't it Padawan Tano?" Barris asked, a slight grimace on her face. Ashoka sighed and patted Barris on the shoulder.

"We can only dread."

Scorpion Mark III Main Battle Tank **_Murder
Inc.**_

6**th**** Armored Division**

200 Meters from Primary Geonosian Foundry

Operation **_Smokescreen**_

Sergeant Maximillan Schreiber stared hard through his commander's sight. The imposing spires of the foundry soared above the 15 vehicles that composed of the decoy group. The Scorpions, Cobras, Wolverines, and Republic TX-130 _Saber_ tanks had made a point of being as visible as possible on their approach so as to entice the enemy to attack but so far he hadn't seen so much as a scout. Schreiber turned his sight to face behind, infrared filters kicking in to help see through the large cloud of dust kicked up by the vehicles. Schreiber keyed his mike.

"This is Hammer-6, nothing on sensors."

"_Copy 6. Keep up your swivels, this is the Wild West."_

"We should have seen something by now." Driver Vincent Smith announced.

"Maybe they abandoned it?" Gunner Hector Sunderland asked hopefully.

"Would you? That place churns out Tin Men like candy bars. Too valuable." Schreiber explained, still peering through his sight.

"Yeah, then where are they?" Vincent questioned.

"If it were me, I'd just shut the doors and build as many of the things as possible then make the bad guys come drag me out," Hector lectured. "That or lure the enemy into an ambush." The three men looked at each other in silence.

"Ah hell!" Schreiber keyed his mike. "Colonel, we need to-."

"_ALL VEHICLES STOP NOW!" _The crew was thrown forward as Vincent slammed on the brakes. The assorted vehicles slid or hovered to a halt. "_Reverse, pull back, all tanks fire on that factory. Bastard's trying to ambush us. Lure them out!"_

"Target, factory. Bearing-." Schreiber began to order.

"I know where the damn building is! Firing!" Hector thumbed the trigger. The silence that had so unnerved the men was broken by a rolling thunder as the vehicles unleashed a ragged volley on the foundry. Stone flew and an arc collapsed in a ball of fire. Two rounds from a Cobra clanged into the foundry's main door, leaving large dents. The vehicles began a slow retreat when the ground began bursting around them.

"_Incoming artillery, scatter!" _The assorted vehicles of the decoy

force began to spread out, still retreating like mad. Ramps suddenly appeared from beneath the orange sand as Hailfire Droids raced out of them, firing as they went.

"_Contacts at our Two, Eight, and Twelve-o-clocks! All units engage, fire at will!"_

"Target, Hailfire, Two-o-clock!" Schreiberg ordered.

"Got 'em, firing!" The tank shuddered from a direct hit before its gun belched flame. The armor-piercing round punched through the Hailfire's left wheel hub, shearing it off the craft. The bare axel dug into the ground and the droid burst apart in a cloud of kicked up sand. A _Saber_ tank exploded as a rocket hit its mark. AATs began hovering their way up the ramps and the Foundry's doors opened, revealing a group of Spider Walkers. Two let loose from their top cannons, beams slicing a Cobra in half before its munitions detonated. One of the offending droids was then toppled by the twin rockets from a _Saber._

"Target, AAT, Three-o-clock!" Schreiberg directed.

"Firing."

"We're getting cut off, they're encircling us!" Vincent alerted. The tank rocked as artillery fell around them. A Scorpion burst apart as the high powered lasers found their mark.

"Target, AAT, Twelve-o-clock. Nail the bastard!"

"I see it. Sending!" Hector replied. The tank shuddered and the offending vehicle ground to a halt, hatches belching smoke. Suddenly, four red triangles appeared on the tank's aerial map.

"_Wolverines, incoming strike craft, take 'em down!"_ The three Wolverines pivoted their dual missile pods. Locks were instantly achieved and the missiles soared free. One Geonosian fighter disintegrated while another turned hard in a crushing 10-G turn. The missile easily kept pace and burrowed deep into the craft before detonating in a spectacular fireball. The other two opened fire and a Wolverine was enveloped in fire and sand as its missiles blew up in their tubes, taking a guarding _Saber_ with it. The fighting was incredibly one sided as the Scorpions' main gun could punch through any armor with ease while their own could withstand multiple hits. What the joint UNSC/Republic force lacked was numbers and the enemy tanks and walkers just kept coming. The fighters turned for another pass and were struck with more missiles. Once spiraled away, breaking apart. The other bored in, trailing flame and debris before slamming into a pair of Scorpions. One tank rumbled through the fireball that followed, scorched and smoking. The other was gone.

"_This is Colonel Stuart, we are being encircled, requesting air support on grid coordinates 45 Alpha by 36 Indigo!"_

"_Copy Colonel, Shortswords inbound to your coordinates. ETA two minutes."_

"_Understood, all tanks get back to the Point ASAP! Full reverse boys, let's go!"_ _Murder Inc. _received another direct hit and Hector was thrown into the bulkhead. His helmet hit with a clang and

he reeled back, pulling the trigger. The gun roared and the shell sailed harmlessly over the enemy.

"You alright Hector?" Schreiber asked. Hector shook his head to clear the stars and gave a thumbs up.

"Rang my bell, but I'm good."

"_This is Dingo 1, we're on approach!_"

"Finally!" Vincent cheered.

"Hang on, their coming in at the wrong angle." Schreiber peered into his screen. Hector fired on his own, missing again. Another Cobra began burning.

"_Shortswords, break off, you're going to drop too short!_"

"Oh FUCK! HARD RIGHT, HARD RIGHT!" Schreiber yelled. The tank lurched right, kicking up a column of sand.

"_Break off Dingo, break off!_" The bombs left the aircraft, screaming downward. "_Scatter damn it, SCATTER!_"

"BRACE!"

"HOLY FUCK!" The bombs slammed to the earth, nearly enveloping the decoys force. _Murder Inc. _was practically thrown to the right and Schreiber was flung against his command sight and saw stars.

****Geonosian Tunnel System****

****1200 Meters Beneath Primary Droid Foundry****

****Operation **_**Smokescreen**_**

The ride to and climb down into the tunnels had gone remarkably well. Not so much as gust of wind had moved and the Separatists seemed to be completely distracted. Now, Ashoka, Barris, and the Rangers were slowly making their way through the tunnels, wary for any movement.

"It's just a little bit further." Barris announced, looking back at the rest of the party. Ashoka nodded and the Rangers tensed, ready for anything. They turned the corner and were met with a dead end.

"What? I thought you said it was just up ahead!" Ashoka said, pointing at her fellow Padawan.

"It should be, I memorized the maps and studied them carefully." Barris defended.

"Clearly you didn't, it's a dead end!"

"Maybe we took a wrong turn, let's head back the way we came." Ashoka sighed and followed Barris as she led them back around the corner. They returned to the junction and turned left. The tunnel curved to the right slightly and the group again reached a dead end.

"Great, another dead end!" Ashoka said, frustrated.

"I don't understand I followed the map exactly. There should be an entrance somewhere near here."

Duncaster harrumphed as he turned to watch the way they had just come from.

"Care to comment Dun?" Carthum asked dangerously.

"No sir, nothing to say." Duncaster replied.

"I thought so."

"Couldn't we just blow a hole through here ma'am? I have plenty of explosives." Xing suggested. Barris shook her head.

"No, that could bring the tunnel down on top of us. The best option is to retrace our steps, perhaps I made a mistake further ahead."

"That might take too long Commander, the longer we wander about down here the longer the decoys have to hold out. Not to mention increasing our chances of being discovered." Carthum commented, hefting his rifle.

"Well we're not going to achieve anything by just standing around. I'm with Barris, let's head back and see where we went wrong." Ashoka said with an air of finality. Carthum nodded and motioned to his men.

"You heard the Commander, move out. Rodriguez, take point Wenderson, cover the rear." The Rangers and Padawans again followed their own footprints and returned to the junction. Taking the tunnel that led them here they again went through the series of intersections, climbs, descents, and overall claustrophobic conditions of the Geonosian tunnels. Suddenly Rodriguez froze, holding up a clenched fist. The rest of the group instantly halted and the Rangers crouched in unison.

"Hostiles on the tracker, ten meters front." Rodriguez alerted, aiming his SAW down the hallway. Duncaster moved forward to join him, DMR at the ready.

"Pull back, let's see if they follow." Carthum ordered. The group of Jedi and Rangers slowly retreated, eyes glued to the dark tunnel ahead.

"They're still appearing sir, I think they're onto us."

"How many?"

"Two. Do we take them?"

"Yeah, but keep it quiet." Duncaster and Xing looked at each other and nodded before attaching their rifles to their backs and unsheathing their combat knives. The rest of the squad backed away as the two men tucked themselves up against the wall.

"Here we go." Xing said, Ashoka just making him in the dark. Two Geonosians ambled in, just passing the two Rangers before freezing. They whirled around just in time to be blinded by the men's helmet spotlamps. They let out a cry and shielded their eyes and then the soldiers were on them. Xing grabbed the bug by its neck and wrenched his knife into its trachea before slashing it out through the left side. Green blood spurted out and it went down in a fit of gurgles. Duncaster had tackled his to the ground and was stabbing it repeatedly in the chest, blood, skin, and torn muscle being flung with each removal of the blade. When the Geonosians were dead the men wiped their blades clean and returned them to their sheaths.

"Alright then, let's crack on." Duncaster stated, grabbing the rifle from his back.

**Murder Inc.**

Bomb Crater

1200 Meters from Droid Foundry

Operation **_Smokescreen**_

The turret was dark when Schreiber came too. He groaned as he struggled to sit up, someone holding him down. A bandage had been wrapped around his head and he found Hector looking at him with relief.

"Max? Max! Thank god, we thought we lost you!" Hector said as he eased back into his position on the gun.

"How longâ€¦ was Iâ€¦ out?" Schreiber asked, thoughts muddled.

"Twelve minutes sir but you were barely breathing." Hector replied as he fiddled with his sight. Their leader now awake, it was back to business.

"Christ," Schreiber muttered. "Status? Sound off boys!"

"I'm good!" Vincent shouted from his station, trying to peer through the small viewport on his hatch. The plexiglass was heavily cracked and he strained to make out even the biggest shapes. "Good to have you back!"

"I'm fucked up but I'm up. To hell with the Navy for that one, fuck!" Hector called as he tried to swivel his gun. Nothing happened.

"And the tank?" Schreiber asked, struggling to focus on the task at hand.

"The concussion knocked out the electrics, starting manually." Vincent grabbed a large red lever on his left and yanked it down hard. The tank's engine sputtered before dying.

"Sights are down, popping the hatch." Schreiber groaned as his head began to throb. He reached up and twisted the manual release lever. Vincent lifted his own lever up and pulled it down. _Murder Inc._ again sputtered and died. Schreiber shoved the hatch open and poked

his head out. Carnage greeted him. The bombs had landed virtually on top of the task force, decimating the enemy forces as well as the troops the pilots tried to protect. Burning tanks, Spider Walkers, and droids littered the area, black smoke covering the battlefield. The tank sputtered and spat one more time before it roared to life almost as if in triumph.

"Ha ha ha, that's my girl!" Vincent cheered and the whirring of the tank's computers leaked out from the open hatch. Schreiber ducked back inside and secured the hatch shut. The automated loader clanked as it loaded a fresh round. Static crackled from the speaker as the radio came back online.

"__-immediately! Repeat, all UNSC and Grand Army units are to dig in. CIS forces are launching a major counter-attack on all positions. Operation Smokescreen is a failure, repeat, Operation Smokescreen is a failure, any soldiers apart of that operation are to regroup and pull back to friendly lines! "__

"Fucking hell man, we can't do anything right in this war." Hector muttered as he peered through his sight. "Nothing on the thermals that isn't burning."

"Right, let's get the hell out of here, pull back to Point Rain, maybe we can be of use there."

"Anybody alive out there sir?" Vincent asked. Schreiber shook his head.

"Not that I saw, but we were blind for a while, they could have pulled back. We should too, there's nothing left for us here."

"How do you think those kids are doing?" Hector mused.

"Hopefully better than the Army, now let's get moving!" _Murder Inc._'s engine roared even louder and it began its long, solitary trip back to friendly lines.

****Dead End Chamber****

****Geonosian Tunnels****

****300 Meters Beneath Droid Foundry****

****Operation **_**Smokescreen**_**

"I just don't understand, we've been all over these tunnels!" Ahsoka spat in frustration. Barris frowned, struggling to remember.

"It should be here, the entrance was supposed to be right here." Barris looked around the chamber.

"Maybe they remodeled?" Duncaster asked sarcastically.

"Uh, Commander Unduli, did the map say anything about skylights?" Xing asked, peering at the ceiling.

"It's a cave, caves don't have skylights." Rodriguez pointed out from his position watching the door.

"Then why does this one have a hatch?" Xing asked, pointing. Barris's eyes widened and she raced over to look where he indicated. A closed hatch was indeed above, a faint ring of light around the edges.

"Of course, the answer isn't forward, it's up. Give me a boost." Xing crouched down and she stood on his shoulders, grabbing the hatch release. It swung open and through it she could see battle droids being transported by an over head rail. Hundreds of them.

"That's a lot of droids ma'am." Xing noted as Barris climbed off his shoulders.

"It is a droid factory." Ashoka pointed out. Carthum removed a rope and grapple from his pack and tossed it through the open hatch. He pulled it firmly and the hook caught on something. A few more tugs made sure it was secure. Carthum clicked on his radio.

"_Castle, this is Hoplite, have located reactor room."_ All that replied was static and Carthum tried again. "_Castle, this is Hoplite, do you read?"_ Still static.

"Still no comms huh?" Wenderson asked. Carthum nodded and motioned for the team to ascend.

"Alright Rangers, up and over!" he ordered. Ahsoka and Barris Force Jumped through the hatch, much to the envy of the soldiers.

"Showoffs," Duncaster muttered. He, Xing, and Carthum free climbed up the rope. Wenderson made the ascent, but his tank clanged against the frame of the hatch.

"Too fat sir," Wenderson said simply.

"Alright, you and Rodriguez stay down there and guard the hatch. Once the charges are planted we'll come back down and regroup." Wenderson slid back down the rope and nodded.

"Come on, the reactor is this way!" Barris gestured and Ashoka, Xing, Carthum, and Duncaster followed her deeper into the foundry.

****Foxhole ****

****Defensive Perimeter****

****Point Rain****

Another explosion sent more red sand into the hole Corporal Meverston had dug ten minutes prior. He ducked down, hands pressing down his helmet as debris peppered him. He peeked over the edge at the advancing droids and tanks. They were still in an orderly formation, line abreast and in even columns, sprinting across the desert and firing as fast as their weapons could cycle. It was the standard attack formations ONI had briefed them on: Bls led the Supers which led the tanks which led the Bls and so on and so forth. Droidekas (or Destroyer Droids) acted as breakthroughs, their personal shields capable of stopping most small arms. Meverston shook his head clear, raised his assault rifle, and sent a burst into the mass of droids. Two tumbled, joining their shattered fellows in the dust. Rockets

streamed past on both sides while the remaining Scorpions blasted away at the encroaching enemy.

Machine guns roared, riddling dozens of droids as the heavy rounds punched through as many as three in a row. So far the Seperatists had yet to gain any real ground and they were paying for every inch. The hastily entrenched defenders poured in everything they had. AATs burned and shattered droids carpeted the ground but the enemy just kept coming. A pair of V-19 Torrents screamed overhead, carpeting a section of the front. The ground was perpetually rolling and shaking as bomb after bomb pounded the Seperatist onslaught. Men screamed, guns cracked, and cannons thundered while black smoke filled the air. And above the turmoil of battle was the constant, unrelenting chatter over the radio.

"_Man down, man down!"_

"Droidekas on the right, hose them!"

"Steady lads, more coming in!"

"Corpsman, medic, somebody!"

"Airstrike inbound, danger close!"

Meverston emptied his magazine before letting it fall, a fresh one already removed from his combat vest. He slammed it home and shoved the bolt forward with a smack. His counter read "32" and he sighted on the closest droids. In the distance the foundry loomed, churning out an army a minute. He fired another burst before glancing to his left to the other foxholes. Some held one man, others two, clone and marine alike frantically firing at the enemy. A thermal detonator soared into one and blew its occupant up and out, arm flying and blood arching from his tattered camouflaged fatigues and he was instantly pulled into another foxhole by a clone trooper. A Scorpion fired its coaxial machine gun from its fighting hole, a pit dug into the ground so only the turret was visible above the sand. Three Republic Gunships flew overhead, strafing the enemy formation. An AT-TE blew apart, showering the nearby soldiers with shrapnel. Something dropped behind him and Meverston whirled around, rifle aimed. A clone trooper looked backed from behind his t-shaped visor.

"This seat taken?" he asked.

"Mi casa su casa!" Meverston replied. Before the trooper could comment laser rounds kicked up the sand in front of them. Both men opened fire into the mass of droids.

****Dead End****

****Tunnels Beneath Primary Droid Foundry****

"Status sir?" Rodriguez asked through the radio, rifle at the ready.

"_Still moving in, hang tight."_

"Copy." Rodriguez took a knee, pressing himself into the wall of the tunnel. Seconds ticked by and Wenderson shifted uneasily, hefting the

nozzle of his flamethrower. Rodriguez's motion tracker flashed, a red dot appearing a meter away. "Contact, a meter out, 12 o'clock."

"He coming this way?" Wenderson asked.

"Not sure." The tracker flashed again, the red dot had become two and was now much closer. "Shit, make that two and they're coming right for us." The two Rangers pressed hard against the walls, staring straight ahead.

"I got 'em, damn tunnels limit the detection range." Wenderson announced.

"Use your side arm, don't want to suffocate us." Rodriguez reminded before switching on his radio. "_We got two contacts sir, moving in close."_

"_Deal with them, quietly if possible._"

"_Yes sir._" The link clicked off and both men stared hard down the tunnel. The dots began to rapidly multiply, increasing from two to five to ten.

"That's not good," Wenderson said. Rodriguez tossed him a magazine for his pistol before keying the mike again, deadpan.

"Make that ten sir."

"_Almost there, kids are getting ready to place the charges._"

"Then we'll keep the door open." The enemy were almost on top of them, their number having grown to twenty. "For as long as we can." Both men were tense, fingers on triggers and sights locked on the passage before them. Any second now Geonosians would be charging through the darkness. The dots reached the center of the tracker and then kept going. Wenderson swore under his breath and relaxed. Rodriguez turned to him and shrugged.

"Guess they were above us."

"Yeah, but where were they going?" The Rangers looked up and Wenderson frantically removed his tank while Rodriguez began to climb the rope.

****Reactor Room****

"Where the hell did they come from?!" Duncaster yelled as he put a bullet through a Geonosian's head, splattering the ceiling behind it with blood and brain.

"We must have triggered an alarm somehow, status on the charges?" Carthum asked, glancing over his shoulder to check on the Commanders.

"Nearly finished!" Ashoka called back from where she, Barris and Xing were arming the generator for detonation.

"Gonna need a way out sir, I'm gonna put this place into orbit!" Xing explained cheerfully as he placed his last explosive into place.

"Glad you're having fun bud!" Duncaster spat. Two Geonosians dove at the demolitions officer. Barris leapt and cleaved them in half. A large door at the far end of the room opened and battle droids marched in.

"We got clankers!" Ashoka yelled as she leapt down, using her sabers to batter away enemy laser fire. Duncaster put a round through the chest of another Geonosian before opening fire on the droids. Behind the droids two large vehicles floated behind. They looked like snails and were clearly covered in thick armor plating.

"We've got _tanks_" Xing shouted.

"Fall back!" Carthum ordered. The group ran for the opposite door when it too opened and more droids and tanks poured into the room. The Rangers and Jedi turned and ran to the right, blasting droids as they sprinted. They reached a dead end and the droids circled them,

"Attention Republic Dogs, you are currently outnumbered and outgunned." A droid's voice called from one of the tanks. A command droid had popped his head out of the hatch. "Drop your weapons and surrender." Geonosians began picking up and disarming the explosives. A tense standoff began as the Allies and the Separatists eyed each other.

"I can pop that commander sir." Duncaster whispered finger primed on his rifle's trigger.

Carthum's radio suddenly crackled.

"_Hop... ..astle, do you copy over?" _ Carthum keyed the mike with his chin. His helmet was sealed and the line secure, no one would be listening in.

"_Am compromised, requesting ordnance on my position."_ Carthum replied.

"_Negative, high risk of friendly fire."_

"_Rodriguez and Wenderson reporting sir, we're behind the rear most tank."_

"_Castle, Sapper, fire on my position now!"_

"_Cannot comply, orders ar-..." _

"_Papa Bravo, repeat _Papa. Bravo."

"_...Coordinates confirmed, firing for effect." _Xing keyed his own mike.

"_Papa Bravo sir?"_ he asked.

"Plan B," Carthum replied. He glanced at Ashoka, who nodded. He activated his voice amplifier. "Rangers engage, kill 'em all!" Then all hell broke loose.

****Foxhole****

****Point Rain****

"On your right, the right!" the trooper, who identified himself as Scholar, shouted. Meverston shifted his aim and put down a pair of Super Battle Droids before dropping another empty magazine onto the carpet of shells below. He patted his vest and found one of the last full pouches and yanked out a full one. Slapping it against his helmet he then reloaded.

"Running low." Meverston told his new partner.

"Then stop missing!" Scholar replied, downing a B1 with a head shot. The incoming artillery fire had lessened but the Separatists had gained more ground as the Allies began to run low on ammunition. A machine gun nest to their left raked the droid formations, dropping dozens in a row. An AAT swiveled its top turret and sent a round into the gun pit. Dirt and rubble flew out and the gun fell silent. Then the screaming started. Meverston's radio crackled. It was Nichols.

"_Get that gun back up Mev, move it!_" Meverston keyed his own microphone.

"Yes sir!" He gestured to Scholar. "We're getting on the MG!"

"Lead the way!" A Gunship strafed the AAT, blowing apart its droid escorts. Meverston and Scholar sprinted across the sand and flopped into the trench. Another Marine was lying flat on his back, face and chest horribly burned, belly slit open. His loader was a pile of charred flesh and bone.

"Jesus, Medic! Corpsman!" Meverston shouted to the second line. Scholar grabbed the mangled corpse and tossed it out of the hole, blood covering his armor. "Check if that gun is still working!" A rocket soared overhead and burrowed into the AAT before exploding. The top hatch was blasted skyward and flames licked out of the open hatch.

"Looks fine to me, but I don't know what it's supposed to look like!" Scholar replied. A B1 suddenly ran up to the gun pit. Scholar shoved his rifle's barrel under its head and shot it off. Meverston frantically tried to stop the bleeding.

"Oh god, it hurts! Stop! STOP!" Meverston beat the other Marine's hands away.

"Stop moving you'll only make it worse!" Meverston glanced behind him to see Scholar experimentally pull the triggers on the machine gun. It fired a burst.

"_Kandosi!_" Scholar yelled and fired another, longer burst into a group of approaching Supers. Most of the rounds fell short, a few punched into the lead droid and it staggered back. A corpsman tumbled down into the pit with them and shoved Meverston out of the way.

"Cover me while I work on him!" the corpsman turned his attention to the wounded man.

"Gah! Stop touching it! Please!" the marine begged. The medic opened his pack, took out a sharp of morphine, and shoved it into the man's neck before sticking a can of biofoam into the wound. It filled the cavity and the marine screamed out in agony. Meverston shook Scholar by the shoulder and the clone got out of his way. Meverston wrapped his fingers around the slightly melted triggers and fired a long burst that reduced the encroaching droids to rubble. Scholar fired over Meverston's shoulder, picking off droids that survived the hail of bullets.

"Hey, hey, look at me buddy!" The corpsman snapped his fingers in front of the wounded Marine's face. Meverston's HUD finally reported that the marine was Private Gates. Gates began sobbing.

"Don't tell my mom I died this way." The corpsman forced a grin.

"You can tell her yourself, you're gonna make it out of here." Gates looked at him.

"Is it bad doc?" He sounded like a child asking his mom about a paper cut. "Don't bullshit me."

"You're gonna be fine." Meverston fired another burst and the gun clicked empty.

"Reloading!" Meverston opened a charred ammo can and yanked out a fresh belt. He opened the receiver and slapped the belt into place before charging the bolt.

"Fall back to secondary positions, I repeat fall back!" Scholar and Meverston glanced at each other.

"Help me move him!" the corpsman ordered. They both grabbed one of Gate's shoulders and heaved him over the edge of the pit. Scholar provided covering fire. "Get his legs, trooper, covering fire!" Meverston clamped his hands around the Gates' calves. Uniform and flesh slid off onto his gloves, revealing bone. Gates screamed and Meverston dropped his legs. The corpsman cursed. "Grab his other shoulder." Meverston did so and they bodily carried Gates, whose legs dragged. The corpsman was suddenly shot in the back. He grunted and fell to the ground.

"Scholar!" Meverston called out, shifting to fireman carry Gates. The trooper scooped up the corpsman and the pair sprinted to the safety of the Allied positions. An AT-TE put itself between them and the enemy and clone troopers raced to help with the wounded. Gates and the corpsman were taken behind the lines while the two uninjured men dropped down into a shallow trench. A Marine tossed Meverston a rifle and the two men joined their comrades in gunning down the approaching enemy.

****Reactor Room****

****Primary Droid Foundry****

Ashoka slashed through three more droids and dodged a barrage of tank fire. A Geonosian barreled into her chest and she was knocked flat. It reared up at drive a blade when Duncaster tackled it off her, wrestling it to the ground. She jumped up just as the Ranger snapped

its neck. "Thanks."

"Yep." He dove out of the way as a pair of droids fired on him. They quickly lost their heads to Barris and a both Padawans dodged another round from the tank.

"We can't penetrate that armor!" Xing yelled as he tucked himself against something he hoped was too important to destroy. "Plus the buggers took all my bombs!"

"They still live?" Ashoka asked, deflecting lasers with her saber. One of them struck a Geonosian in the chest and it fell to the floor.

"Should be, I don't think they know how our stuff works yet." She could sense his grin. "You want me to blow 'em?" Ashoka nodded. Xing grabbed his detonator. "Fire in the hole!" He thumbed the button and the ground shook. One of the doorways collapsed and it's floor caved in, swallowing one of the tanks. Chunks rained down from the ceiling, smashing apart assembly lines.

"Must be the artillery!" Rodriguez shouted and the Geonosians all froze before frantically heading towards the hole. The command droid looked baffled and waved at them frantically.

"Stop. Where are you going? Get back here now!" it demanded. Carthum pointed at the distracted droid.

"Grab that tank and shut him up!" Wenderson and Barris sprinted towards the tank. The droid turned and pointed at the two.

"Gunner, blast the-." Wenderson silenced it forever with his Magnum while Barris yanked the droid clear with the Force. Rodriguez grabbed a droid and shoved it hard into a pole before ramming his knife between its photo receptors. Wenderson scampered up the tank and fired down into vehicle. It stopped and he jumped inside. Barris followed him and after a moment Wenderson's tired voice sounded over the radio.

"_Tank's ours sir._" Said tank suddenly turned and blasted apart its partner. More chunks fell from the ceiling and Duncaster frantically dodged a large pipe.

"This place it falling apart!" he shouted.

"Everyone, get to the tank!" Ashoka ordered. The Rangers and Jedi sprinted for the vehicle and clambered inside. It was a comically tight fit and Duncaster sealed the hatch.

"Well this is cozy," he said dryly.

"Get us out of here!" Barris ordered and the tank rumbled as more debris fell. A massive chunk of ceiling fell and crushed the reactor, which promptly detonated. The tanks and its occupants were thrown forward and Ashoka lost consciousness.

****Defensive Trench****

****Point Rain****

"Look at that!" A trooper yelled. In the distance the Droid Foundry, which had begun being pummeled by the frigate Sanderson, suddenly exploded. A cheer rose from the assembled men as the frigate returned its attention to obliterating the Separatist force as it desperately retreated. The incoming fire stopped all together and Meverston slumped against the trench. Pelicans raced from the Sanderson as Pod Heavy Dropships blazed in from orbit. A Republic cruiser entered the atmosphere as well, unleashing a squadron of Torrents which went off to bomb a target in the distance. Scholar flopped down next to him as Meverston removed his canteen and fumbled with the cap. The Marine took a long drink before offering it to the clone.

"Want a hit?" Meverston asked.

"Too right I do." Scholar replied and removed his helmet. Unlike the clones Meverston had seen on the ship he searched, Scholar has closely cropped hair. Besides that he looked exactly like the others. He took a swig before passing it back. "Thanks." Three Gunships flew overhead, followed closely by a Pelican, to the burning ruins of the Foundry.

"Guess the Rangers and Jedi didn't make it." Meverston noted with a sigh.

"What makes you say that?" Scholar asked, watching as the ships landed. The Marines and Clones began to gather up the dead and wounded.

"Frigate did all the work. Stupid plan." Scholar nodded solemnly as two Marines lifted a dead trooper from the trench.

"Yeah. Stupid plan."

****Collapsed Foundry****

"I don't see them Skywalker. We need to return to our positions and continue our advance before the Separatists attack again." Luminara Undulli said, putting a hand on Anakin's shoulder. He shook her off.

"No! I am not abandoning her!" He look pointedly at Rex, who was organizing the lifting of debris by an LAAT/c. "Keep searching Rex!" The captain nodded.

"Yes general, haul away!" The gunship rose and deposited it onto an ever growing pile in the ravine. When the reactor exploded, the tunnels beneath the structure had collapsed, leaving a deep bit filled with smoke and burning rubble. A UNSC "Pod" dropship had unloaded cargo loaders they called a "Cyclops" as well as a large mobile crane. Gunderson, Fredrickson and two Marines lifted a beam out of the way.

"Skywalker, this kind of attachment can be dangerous." Luminara warned. Skywalker faced her again, furious.

"So we just leave them for dead?! Our Padawans trust us Luminara, they depend on us. Don't you care about yours?" She looked insulted.

"Of course I do, but I am also ready to let her go when the time

comes. Be it her death or her knighting. They can't stay with us forever Anakin. At some point we have to let go." Anakin's brow furrowed.

"Maybe, but not yet!" Anakin waved to the Gunderson. "Anything General?!"

"Not yet! Maybe if you two would help we'd get there faster!" He wiped his brow before pointing at another piece. "That one next!"

****Buried Separatist "Super Tank"****

Ashoka woke up to a hot and dimly lit tangle of bodies. Dust and smoke choked the air. She coughed. "Barris? Sergeant?" Duncaster stirred from underneath Carthum's legs.

"Is it last call yet?" he slurred. He shook his head and looked around. "Well shit, it worked." He looked down. "Who's legs are these?"

"The Sarge's." Xing coughed. "I'm here too, how are you guys?" He was pinned under a console. Barris finally stirred, entangled with Wenderson.

"What happened?" she asked. "Everyone okay?"

"Xing reporting Commander." His voice was strained. "Something's broken, not sure what."

"Juarez, Wenderson, and the Sarge are still out," Duncaster said. "Theeirvitals are stable. Xing, buddy, you might want to lower your heart rate."

"Duncaster, can you open the hatch?" Ashoka asked. The sharpshooter shook his head.

"I'm pinned here, maybe we should have splurged for a double wide?" Ashoka frowned.

"Can anybody move?" she asked. There was silence.

"Calm down everyone, one at a time, no pushing," Duncaster grounded out. Ashoka glared at him.

"Do you ever shut up?" Duncaster looked at her.

"Only when I'm dead. Given our current situation you might not have to wait long."

"Maybe if you would stop talking and start thinking we can get out of this mess!" Ashoka yelled at him. Duncaster snorted.

"Okay! Here, let me try to open the hatch! Oh wait, I'm fucking trapped in a goddamn tank!"

"You stow that shit right fucking now!" Carthum roared, now awake, bringing his legs down hard on Duncatser's chest. "This is not the time for discipline to break down! You're a professional, act like it!"

"Yes Sergeant. Sorry Sergeant." Duncaster said, cowed.

"Getting kinda stuffy in here guys," Xing said weakly.

"Try your radio Sergeant," Barris suggested.

"Yes Commander." There was a pause and then he shook his head. "No comms, must be too deep. Try yours." Ashoka nodded and activated the comlink on her wrist. Static filled the tank and she ran through the frequencies.

"Anakin, it's Ashoka, does anyone read? Hello?" There was no reply. "I need to boost the signal somehow." Duncaster, who managed to wrench an arm free, fumbled with a pouch on his vest. He pulled out a small square device with a screen.

"Try this, it's got a hell of a battery life." He awkwardly threw it and Ashoka caught it. The screen lit up to reveal a picture of two young men in dress uniforms standing behind an older couple. "The panel on the back should come off." Ashoka had to pry it open and it revealed a large battery. "They say it can... it can power a small cart for three days." Ashoka removed the battery and her comlink, removing a few wires.

"Wish me luck." Ashoka muttered and began tapping out a code, pressing the battery to the wires. Loud beeps came from the device.

"You... you... learn that in Jedi school?" Xing said, barely audible before his head fell to the deck.

"Come on... come on..." Ashoka coaxed. She glanced at Barris but the Padawan was out cold. Ashoka's vision swam and she started missing the contacts.

"I... think we should just..." Duncaster fell limp. Carthum shifted.

"Stay with me ma'am... you got this..." He took a deep breath. Ashoka's head lolled and the comlink fell from her hand. "Stay... awake-." He lapsed into unconsciousness. Her vision began to tunnel, growing darker and darker.

"Come on..."

****Foundry Rubble****

"Skywalker, we've found nothing. We should leave." Luminara said sadly.

"NO!" Anakin and Gunderson said.

"I'm not leaving them to die!" Gunderson continued. "You concocted this moronic plan but I'm not going to toss away their lives!" Anakin nodded.

"We're not leaving!" His comlink started to beep. "It's Ashoka! Her signal is coming from over there!"

"Get that fucking crane moving!" Gunderson ordered, pointing. Marines and Troopers alike swarmed the area, hauling away pieces of debris. Anakin and Gunderson joined them. Together they flipped the dented remnants of a door and uncovered the hatch of a tank. Gunderson tried it but the hatch didn't budge. Anakin shoved the man out of the way and activated his lightsaber, slicing through the armor and wrenching the hatch clear with the Force.

"Ashoka!" Anakin shouted down into the vehicle.

"Here." She replied weakly. Anakin turned to Gunderson who was already directing the crane.

"Clear the clamp!" the operator shouted and Anakin stepped back as the large magnetic clamp ceased the hull of the vehicle. It lifted the battered war machine upwards, debris sliding off and hitting the ground with a clang, and set it down gently in a clear patch. Anakin joined the tide of soldiers who began lifting a Ranger through the hatch. This was followed by two more until Ashoka accepted an offered hand and she was hauled upwards. Barris and two more Rangers followed and the Padawans stood on uneasy feet. One of the Rangers was bleeding profusely and he was hurried into a waiting gunship, one of his comrades supporting a blood bag. Anakin ran up to the pair of padawans, Master Undulli not far behind.

"Snips!" Anakin said, relieved. Ashoka gave him a brittle grin.

"Mission accomplished Master."

****Scorpion Mark III Main Battle Tank **_**Murder Inc.**_**

****Behind Large Rock Formation****

****40 Kilometers East of Point Rain.****

Schreiberg dropped down the hatch and sealed it shut. "Coast is clear boys, let's get her rollin'." After the friendly fire incident that had wiped out the decoy force, _Murder Inc._ and her crew were making their way back to friendly lines. Their radio, thermal sights, and a multitude of other systems had failed soon after the tank began moving. As Separatist reinforcements attacked Point Rain Schreiberg tried to stay as far away from them as possible, skirting the marching battalion and hiding in the rocks. Smith yanked the manual start and the tank roared back to life. Maneuvering around their hiding spot Sunderson and Schreiberg looked through their respective scopes, scanning for signs of the enemy.

"GPS is still out guys, any eyes on that factory?" Smith asked, hands clenched tight on the wheel.

"Yeah, I got it, it's at our eight o'clock- Whoah!" The ground shook and the rolling of an explosion could be heard through the hull of the tank. "The place just went up sky high!"

"Seriously?!" Smith asked, elated. Sunderson nodded, laughing.

"Like a fucking roman candle. Burn you sons a' bitches!"

"Looks like the Rangers pulled it off!" Schreiberg commented,

relieved.

"Yeah, get some Army! Hoo'ah!" Smith cheered.

Schreiberg reveled in the sight of the flaming building before turning his attention back to the surrounding landscape. A small group of black dots caught his attention, swirling about in the distance. "We got contact, four o'clock!" Sunderson swiveled the turret, bringing the gun to bare.

"What is it?" Smith asked.

"Geos, load canister." Schreiberg ordered. The auto-loader clunked as it loaded the appropriate round.

"They're headed this way!" Sunderson advised.

"All stop!" Smith slammed on the breaks and the tanks slid to a stop. "Depress barrel, we're gonna play dead." Schreiberg watched as the swarm grew as it approached, Geonosians popping out of the ground at random intervals to join the mass. Sunderson tensed as they buzzed overhead but the Geonosians gave the tank no thought. They flew off in the direction of a large mountain. Schreiberg watched them shrink in the distance. "All clear, let's go." The tanks rumbled back into motion.

"That was weird." Sunderson said simply, tracking them with the turret. Schreiberg nodded.

"Yeah." He frowned as the bugs seemed to meld into the mountainside. _Where are you going?_

****A/N:** This is the Chapter Sixteen I wanted to do, so I did it. The next chapter will not take as long. For now, I hope this edit and extension will suffice. Warm regards and much respect! -Arm Chair General**

End
file.